



A perfect

Mismatch

Leena Varghese



Indian Author
Collection

“Allow me,” she purred softly holding the tangled knot of the tie in her hands. He was so close that she could see the brown orbs of his eyes that quickly masked his surprise. He stood only a few inches away from her looking down with that brooding gaze at her.

Slowly, unable to resist the urge, Zara slid up the knot inexorably tightening the silk noose around his neck without blinking. “Up or down?” she asked softly, slowly becoming aware of the incredible masculine scent of him mingled with some exotic musk aftershave that had her imagination soar with pictures of a dark warrior from the past.

Armaan’s eyes gleamed with the same challenge, letting her tighten the knot further up, until he felt her hands settle unsteadily under his chin. Then he said in a growl that sent goose bumps skittering across her skin. “What do you have in mind? I am game, if you are.”

About the Author

LEENA VARGHESE lives in Mumbai with her husband and two boisterous kids. Amidst the cacophony of a tumultuous household and managing her illustration work, she squeezes in the time to give vent to her creative passions such as writing and painting. She loves to experiment with various media including oils, watercolours and pastels.

Leena firmly believes that everyone comes into the world equipped with an umbrella for the rainy days. Anyone can be creative enough to turn lemons into lemonade, topped with iced pragmatism. A life spent in learning and doing new things even when failure stares you in the face, is a life well lived indeed. So trying your hand at just about everything that comes your way is a good idea to keep yourself alive and kicking! Her mantra for happiness is to never be complacent and always keep evolving.

This is Leena Varghese's debut book for Mills & Boon®!

A Perfect Mismatch

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To M, for being the catalyst ...

Dear Reader

Like all die-hard romantics, I love happy endings. Even the most hardened cynics (they may gag before admitting it!) harbour a tiny space in their hearts filled with the hope of happy endings. And that is the one reason we all love a good romance. It is the 'feel good' factor (the scientifically inclined would resolutely call it oxytocin) that envelops us when we read a love story. However poignant, dark or even violent its contents, it is the firm assurance that things would turn out just fine, that makes us pick up a romance novel.

My story is about two people who have gone through a painful childhood, scarred and mistrustful, unable to let love into their hearts or learn to trust each other. Trust is an integral part of love that keeps it all going. Without trust there is no love. You may love someone deeply but it will eventually wither away if there is no trust mutually. And that forms the crux of every love story.

Every relationship is defined by the personality of the two people it encompasses. Armaan is talented, temperamental, stubborn, fiercely passionate, driven by his inner demons. Only someone equally strong, capable and fearless like Zara could handle an alpha male like him. They are antagonistic and passionate, downright silly at times and yet, vulnerable. The result is resounding fireworks and sizzling chemistry.

Are they human enough to accept their follies and learn to trust each other with deep abiding faith and immeasurable love? Read on to find out.

Hope you enjoy my debut book as much as I enjoyed writing it.

Love you all.

Leena Varghese

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1

Zara rose from the wrought iron swing and picked up a dry leaf from the cemented floor, twirling it absently between her fingers. The terrace garden at the Malhotra house was lush even in the heat of the afternoon. Delhi at the cusp of summer was beautiful even though it was getting hotter by the day. She was glad that she was going back to her single bedroom apartment soon, her own tiny space of solitude in Gurgaon. She pushed back a thick lock of straight hair and stuffed it into the heavy, silken bun at the nape of her neck.

Things at work were great. A chartered accountant by profession, it had been a triumph for Zara when she landed a plum job in a multinational company five years ago. It had been the beginning of her hard-earned freedom. She had always excelled in academics and worked hard to reach where she was today.

Earning a handsome salary was helpful in many ways. The little star that Zara put for herself in her mental career graph was satisfying. So was the thought that it had helped her move one level up on the road to emotional freedom. Zara moved out of the oppressively opulent Seth residence, from her aunt, Sudha Seth's guardianship, into her own cozy little apartment.

Zara was also fortunate that her wish for a house was powered by her inheritance. It was enough to last her a lifetime if she invested it well. But she had been able to access it only after she had turned twenty-one. However Zara could never forget one painful fact that the inheritance lying in the bank in her name, was left to her by her grandfather after her mother's mysterious disappearance and death. Being Zara's official guardian for years, aunt Sudha, her mother's elder sister, had grudgingly provided for her.

Yes, life was good as long as she did not dwell on her tangled roots.

Another draught of warm breeze lifted the strands of her hair. She looked around at the lush garden. The Malhotra house held many memories, some of them painful, even though she had now overcome those childhood years of loneliness. A flash of memory skittered across the surface of her thoughts. Four children playing years ago in this garden ... Someone was pulling her pigtails and she was yelling ... *Armaan* ...

The memories waned. She looked at her watch with a sigh, walking about restlessly. She had been out of town and too busy with work to make that obligatory visit last month for her late uncle, Ajay Seth's death anniversary. Her aunt had grumbled about it for days. So Zara had apologized and dropped in at the Seth residence for the weekend. But her aunt was not to be appeased by a mere visit. Zara had reluctantly agreed to accompany her aunt to her best friend Vini Malhotra's house where she had spent the last four hours.

Sudha was at this moment sitting in Vini's spacious drawing room downstairs. The visit, as usual, had stretched long. Not wanting to intrude upon their hushed conversation, she had strolled towards the terrace. Her cousin Bani had disappeared much before Zara's exit from the room.

Startled to hear a thwacking sound near her feet, she found that a dripping mud ball had landed near her shoes. She was too late in moving away as another one slammed into her chest while yet another came sailing through the air, hitting her right under her chin, disintegrating into several muddy clumps on her shirt.

Squeals of delight sounded from behind the water tank. Vini aunty's grandchildren!

"Hey!" Zara shouted. There was some scampering about and two little imps darted out from behind the tank, flew past her line of vision, and disappeared down the stairs. A wicked grin lit up her face at the sight of the culprits. She scooped up wet mud from the nearby pot and raced after them.

Zara was in the garden just in time to see the kids scoot. Her aim was good, but the kids were faster. The ball of mud left her hands and landed behind the bougainvillea bushes where there was a muffled

yelp of disgust completely unlike the voices of the children. Zara rushed to see what catastrophe she had unleashed.

Her heart lurched when the familiar sensation curled in her tummy. Her mind conjured up the masculine face she had dreamed about as a naïve young girl. *Armaan!*

Armaan Malhotra stared aghast at his artistic efforts lying in the damp grass with futile rage bubbling up inside him. He was furious. His canvas was blotchy with mud and he had to finish the series in a week's time. The giggling and scurrying he heard from the nearby bushes left him in no doubt that it was one of the children. He strode toward the bush and pulled out Natasha by her pigtails. She yowled like a cat on hot coals screaming for her 'mommy'. Nishant was only a blur at the end of the garden.

"Who did this?" Armaan was holding Natasha by the scruff of her neck. She knew when her uncle was seriously angry. He would have forgiven anything if it had not been for the ruined canvas.

"Quit harassing the child. It was me." The voice that spoke behind him was vaguely familiar.

Armaan turned around, dropping Natasha who scooted out of the garden, glad to have the matter out of her hands.

Armaan could have sworn that the short woman, standing defiantly in front of him with her muddy hands on her hips, uncaring for the way it smudged her pair of loose pants and the giant balloon-shirt, was plain crazy! There was mud all over her and part of her chin was smeared with generous streaks of it.

"Zara! What are you doing here?" asked Armaan, curiosity getting the better of him.

Zara had not seen him for a couple of years. Not that the previous times had been very pleasant occasions. It was a disaster, every time she came into his sizzling radius. She had been grateful that this time he had not ventured out of his studio-cum-swanky apartment in the secluded nook of the sprawling garden.

Unfortunately her relief was short-lived. Zara wished she could be comfortable with him. But all she could do was either erupt into flaming temper that usually culminated into an ugly argument, or

fester in sullen silence that neither of them was willing to break. It had been the same since they had been children. He made her feel inadequate! And Zara thoroughly disliked not being in control of the situation.

Now, as Zara stood in front of him, she felt suddenly out of breath. Controlling her feelings, she waved her hands expressively. "I am sorry about the canvas. I was on the terrace when the kids began to pummel me with mud patties. I threw one at them and it landed on ... Er ... I did not see you. The bushes covered my view!" she finished lamely.

Zara cringed as Armaan stared at her as if she had sprouted horns.

Contrary to her belief, Armaan was thinking something altogether different. She had a husky voice, that seemed to slide like warm honey on his senses, Armaan acknowledged grudgingly.

"You were playing with the kids?" The sight of those brilliant, insolent grey eyes fanned by thick lashes arrested his thoughts. Was it the scattered sunlight in the garden that glinted like a thousand diamonds in her eyes? He curbed the distraction in time. All the hard work of the past few weeks was lying in the wet grass and she seemed to be unperturbed by the destruction. "Do you have any idea what you have done?"

Zara felt her heart hammering painfully. She recognized the adrenalin rush, her limbs gearing up for battle ... The other, deeper emotions were veiled, especially her reaction to the vast expanse of that torso, in casual t-shirt, the toned biceps and those muscular thighs donned in a fitting pair of denim shorts.

Zara averted her hungry eyes quickly before they connected with his sharp brown gaze. She knew those eyes could light up with rich unbridled laughter when the occasion arose, but right now, they were furious. Quite against her will, her own eyes were disobediently scanning his features, the black hair, long and curly, almost brushing against the nape. The well-groomed moustache and the crisp beard defined his masculine aura giving him a gritty, edgy look. Her flighty imagination conjured up a fantastic pagan god. He was tall, broad, and superbly fit and everything that she could only dream of and

never hope to have. She grimaced inward. A meeting with Armaan Malhotra never failed to unnerve her!

“Uggghhh!” A shrill, female voice screeched behind them. Her cousin Bani had just sauntered into the scene with a platter of burger and fries. She pouted her delicate red lips and wrinkled her nose.

Zara and Armaan glowered at each other ignoring the intrusion.

“What now!” Bani drawled sarcastically. Zara felt the usual antagonism bubble up. Her slender cousin leaned nonchalantly on Armaan’s arm with a cozy familiarity.

Zara ignored Bani and said exasperatedly, “Oh come on! It was a mistake and I have apologized. You are an artist! You can make a new one any time.”

There was a snort of disbelief from Armaan. He picked up the fallen canvas, while examining it with an uncompromising scowl, “You think it is easy to accomplish this in a day?” He jabbed a finger at the mud blob that now covered what appeared like a viridian landscape.

“What can I say? It depends on your talent!” Zara replied impishly. “Maybe I could help you.”

Zara knew she was being reckless when she picked up the discarded brush. Dipping it into the palette on the table, she painted a large, childishly simple flower with a smiley face in the middle of the fresh canvas kept on the easel.

There were shouts of outrage from her companions as she curbed a grin, dropped the brush, and walked off with her head held defiantly.

It was evening by the time the elderly ladies said goodbye. Zara could not help but smile at the cacophony that had ensued as she had entered the drawing room after the spat with Armaan. Her apologies were brushed aside by a serene Vini aunty who had shown her the way to the washroom for a change of clothes.

Zara had not encountered Armaan afterwards and was relieved that she did not have to face him again for a long time. The children had been suitably admonished. On their way home, Zara could not help but notice aunt Sudha’s sullen silence that seemed to have no effect on the banal chattering of her cousin Bani. Zara was grateful that for once her aunt was not in a mood for the usual disparaging comments

on her niece's conduct.

Back at the Seth residence that night, her thoughts slid back into her past again. She had always felt like a stranger amidst them. She had to admit that she had never lacked the basic rights that a human being deserved. She had been provided with food, clothing, shelter and a sound education, she thought cynically. Though deep in her heart she had craved for the affection and support of a family, she had long since stopped wishing for the impossible. The only thing that she wanted to know was the whereabouts of her father and the cause of her mother's death.

There had been hushed whispers about a suicide. But her aunt had always steered clear of explanation since it had already caused enough damage to the family. After a while Zara had stopped probing deeper. The only thing she had, that belonged to her mother, was a faded photograph.

"So what are your plans for the future, Armaan?" Vini was slicing apples and arranging them in the plate. Amidst the chattering, she looked around at her family sitting at the breakfast table. Aparna, her daughter was picking up the plates, lecturing the house help who had forgotten to lay the tablemats. Her kids were ready for school. Armaan relaxed with a newspaper at the end of the table. The kids hung on his neck for a goodbye bear hug, the previous day's naughty capers forgotten, and then tumbled out of the house following the chauffeur.

"Armaan?"

Glancing up from the newspaper, Armaan picked up his cup of tea. He had heard the question the first time. He recognized his mother's deliberately casual tone and sighed in resignation although it did not ruffle his composure as it used to do once. At thirty-four, he was quite at ease with himself.

"I have an appointment at three in the afternoon. My assignment is not finished yet and I have been offered a commission for a large mural in one of the posh new office blocks in Gurgaon. An important exhibition is scheduled for the month end and I still have a load of work to do. A complete series of paintings has been delayed due to

unforeseen difficulties so I might be busy for the next six months. I might have to go to Brussels for an art fest by the end of the year. The discussions are still on with an international curator.”

“I was not asking about your professional plans.” His mother had a mildly aggrieved look on her face. He knew better. She could be unreasonably stubborn. He had seen his mother pick up the pieces of her life after her husband’s defection from their fifteen year long marriage. His father had left when he and Aparna were barely in their teens. It had been most painful to accommodate another woman as his father’s wife. Over the years, he had seen his mother stand up to fight for what was rightfully hers. The loss had swept aside all illusions. Armaan could see that another of those long drawn out arguments was brewing under the surface.

“I was talking about your personal life, Armaan,” she admonished gently.

“Bhai, what she means is, are you getting hitched on not?” Aparna drawled with her eyes up towards the ceiling. Never the one to mince words, his sister had put things into perspective. Not that Armaan had not recognized the meaning behind his mother’s subtle questions.

“You already know that I have no such disastrous intentions.” Armaan said bluntly, picking up the newspaper again.

“I know someone who would be perfect for you.” Ignoring his disapproving look, his mother continued.

Aparna giggled. “Not one of those usual ones, Mom! The last time you introduced bhai to a prospective traditional bride from Patiala he zipped out of the house and disappeared for days, locking himself up in his studio. He has not shaved ever since. Will someone get the shears please?”

“Don’t even think about it! It is a man’s prerogative, whether you like it or not!” he retorted.

“We are digressing from the topic!” his mother complained with a peeved air.

“About prospective brides? This time I might leave the country for good!” said Armaan, a smile lifting the corner of his mouth.

“I want you married within the next couple of months.”

“Mom, I really don’t have the time or the patience for this.” Armaan shuffled the papers, gulping down the last few sips of tea hurriedly.

“Don’t you want to know who it is?”

“N-O!” He cut in a tad bit harsher than he intended.

“I had a chat with Sudha yesterday,” continued his mother calmly.

Aparna squealed in excitement. “Bani? Not a bad idea at all!”

“A very bad idea!” Armaan cut in with a foreboding edge. “I told you I am not interested. The least you could have done is ask me before venturing into something that is not going to happen.”

“It is not Bani! I would not want to see my son married to a witless, selfish, shallow woman. I’d rather you remain single,” Vini spoke emphatically.

“Good! That’s settled,” said Armaan relieved. He agreed wholeheartedly with his mother’s description of Bani.

“She is not that bad! At least bhai has known her since we were kids,” Aparna said cheerily.

“I was talking about Zara,” Vini said quietly.

There was a sputter and a wheeze as Aparna choked on her tea while Armaan simply sat stumped in disbelief.

“I know that this is a surprise.” Vini saw her children stare at her as if she had lost her mind.

“A surprise?” Armaan exploded, “Mom, what were you thinking? Were you *thinking* at all?”

Aparna was less dignified as she burst out laughing and coughing together. “Mom, the last time I saw her she was dressed like a brinjal or was it a tent? I mean any of *bhai’s* silly, nude models would be more suitable.” She chortled with mirth again before being suitably tamed by a lancing glare from her brother who could not see the humour in this punishing moment of trial!

“You are right, she has no dressing sense but she has a compassionate heart!” said Vini.

“Ohhhh Mom!” The siblings chorused in unison.

Taking a deep breath Armaan said with a tortured air, “She is just about as compassionate as a poisonous weed and has the

temperament of a cactus!”

Aparna burst into gales of laughter.

“This discussion is over as far as I am concerned.” He was about to rise from the chair.

“Sit down, Armaan!”

Even though it was uttered softly, Vini’s voice cut through the room like a whip. Mother and son glared at each other.

It took a silent simmering pause for them to start the conversation again. “I don’t know why you disapprove of Zara. I have never understood your animosity towards her even when you were children. Yes, she is illegitimate. That’s not her fault. Yes, she is outwardly temperamental and her dressing sense needs work. But haven’t I taught you to overlook such superficial flaws? Zara is intelligent and ambitious and has done very well for herself professionally.”

Armaan was drumming his fingers on the table restlessly.

Vini continued quietly, “Zara has an inner strength and resilience ... and wisdom that many women of her age lack. Don’t let that hard exterior cloud your judgment.”

“Are you sure we are talking about the same person? Armaan was derisive.

“Sometimes I see too many similarities between you!” Vini smiled indulgently at her son. “Zara is the kind of person who reveals true grit and loyalty when the going gets tough. Isn’t that what we all look for in a marriage ... someone to trust in the long run?”

“I don’t think ...” Armaan began, only to be cut short by his mother.

“There is another thing ...” She paused to retrieve an envelope from the side table and read from it. “After your father’s death last month I was contacted by his lawyer yesterday concerning his will. There has been a scramble among the relatives, for the immense wealth he has left behind.”

Armaan grew exasperated. He was not interested in whatever his dead father had to say, having dismissed him from even the periphery of his conscience a long time ago.

Vini continued, “He left a lot of money for his children,

grandchildren and spouses from both his marriages. He has bequeathed several crores worth of land, property and business ventures to various family members.”

“So?” Armaan sat back with a bored air. His father had always been given to playing God!

“So, your father has set the condition that Aparna will get her share if she goes back to her husband and Armaan should be married within a stipulated period of time, which is exactly two months from the opening of the will, failing which, all the money would be transferred to a charitable fund. The trustees of that fund are, as you can guess, his sons from his second marriage and his wife’s relatives. You can draw the conclusion from that as to where the money would disappear if not claimed at the right time.”

“And you want me married for that money?” Armaan was incredulous. He gave in to the urge to chuckle. It was a hard, cynical, joyless sound.

For once Aparna was silent. Her own marriage had soured and she had not been able to clear the misunderstandings with her husband. In a moment of hurt pride, she had walked out on him and the separation had lengthened into two years.

“Whatever you might think about your father, he did love you both and wanted you to be happy. Last year when I visited him at the hospital, he begged for my forgiveness. He did provide for your education. I never took a penny from him after we separated but he insisted on being a part of your life despite your obvious rejection. He did not abandon you, contrary to what you may believe.”

“Are you telling me that money is more important to a child than a parent’s time, affection and loyalty?” Armaan asked, with a black frown.

“All I am saying is that he felt that he had made several mistakes. He did not want you to be so embittered as to lead a solitary life. He knew that you had cut him away but did not want you to be cynical about marriage! He wanted Aparna to be happy and not make the same mistakes he did.”

The siblings stared at her in silence. Vini spoke more emphatically

this time. “You are fortunate that you will not need that money. You are both successful and wealthy enough. His legacy is rightfully yours because you deserve it, not because you need it!”

Vini felt breathless. Her chest was beginning to ache. Armaan knew that she had been neglecting her health of late.

After a long silence Armaan said evenly, “Fix up that appointment with the doctor for tomorrow.” As he turned to leave, his mother probed softly, “What about Zara?”

His eyes were uncompromising when he spoke, “You are right Mom, I don’t need my father’s money. I don’t need a wife either. I have my reservations about both.”

With that, Armaan strode firmly out of the door without seeing his mother’s face, which was as determined as his own countenance.

A similar scene was unraveling in the Seth household albeit with more drama than a tearjerker matinee. Sudha had just revealed Vini’s proposal and the reactions from both her niece Zara and her daughter Bani were most dramatic.

“Mom! It cannot be true! Armaan cannot do this to me!” shrieked Bani, in tears.

Zara sat stunned. She would have laughed outright if it had not been for the seriousness of the matter. The sight of Bani’s hysterical reaction did bring a twitch to her lips though.

“How dare you laugh?” Bani accused.

“I am not laughing! I don’t think there is any need for hysterics. I am not going to accept. You can have him for all I care. You deserve each other,” she said sweetly.

“Why you arrogant bas ...”

“Careful about what you say, Bani.” A flinty glance from Zara stopped Bani mid-word.

“How dare you threaten me? You aren’t worthy of ...”

“I am worth two of his kind!”

Her aunt intervened quickly. “Look, Zara! Even if the situation is not very pleasant, Vini is my best friend and I cannot turn her down.”

“Mom, how can you be on her side?” Bani wailed pitifully.

Sudha ignored her daughter. “I had expected Vini to consider Bani.

Why she should choose you, I have no idea. But you must think about this. In spite of knowing everything about you, she is ready to accept you,” sighed her aunt with a self-righteousness that brought an angry glint in Zara’s eyes.

“My answer is still negative,” Zara replied stonily. “Please thank her on my behalf. I am sure she will understand.” Then after a pause, she continued. “I will go back home today. Thank you *masi*, for a most entertaining weekend.”

She could still hear the argument between her aunt and cousin as she rushed out of the gates. As the day progressed at her workplace, a strange contradictory mixture of emotions assaulted her senses.

Armaan!

Did Armaan know about his mother’s plans? Or was it his? A hysterical laugh bubbled up as she discarded the unbelievable idea. He had not spared her a second glance since he had known her. Naturally, with her unparalleled lack of beauty and grace, she could not even hope for crumbs from the likes of him.

For a fleeting second, Zara imagined herself as his bride. It would be a match made in hell. Her mood soured. She was not desperate enough to marry a heartless man. He was everything that a woman could want: handsome, talented, wealthy and successful. However, she thought otherwise. She could not marry a man who did not have warmth or kindness. For all his talent and perfection, she did not care for what Armaan had to offer her.

So what if she wanted ... felt ... Zara sucked in a thick breath. No! She would not dwell on unnecessary thoughts. Yes, there was a time when she had thought foolishly that Armaan might notice her. The infatuation had swept her away in her teenage years when they had met after a long gap.

But Armaan had hardly glanced at her, always the centre of attention, Bani hanging like an appendage by his side. Six years elder to her, he had been the epitome of masculine beauty and her college years were spent fantasizing about him. Afraid that she would be ridiculed, she had hidden away her secret.

They had come face to face, bumping into each other at one of the

family gatherings and she had spilled her orange juice on his expensive suit. Zara had stuttered unheeded apologies, hopelessly trying to help clear the mess. He had simply drawled with derision that she was blind, before racing upstairs to change.

And Zara had to admit later that it was true. She had been blind to the arrogant, callous way he brushed everyone aside.

They had met several times after that, only to clash without rhyme or reason. After the first few episodes, Zara had developed an iron armour to his lethal charms, at times striking swiftly with a caustic rebuttal before he could react. It became so unbearable that they avoided each other whenever they could and acknowledged each other's presence, with stiff politeness, only when there was no choice.

It was ironical that she had refused his proposal without even considering its significance. But she was no more an innocent girl with starry dreams. She hoped to find love and have a family some day. Armaan was only a fantasy of her youth, which she had stashed away, just like an old postcard.

A text from her best friend, Sumana, reminded her of their coffee date in the evening. She felt relieved that her day would not stay depressing, the way it had started. Zara had a few friends she liked to go out with, although she socialized rarely. Her childhood friends from the boarding school were special, doubling as family. Sharing the dorm with the other girls had taught her independence and responsibility. Some of them moved to different spheres of life, even out of the country. Zara missed a couple of them at times and kept in touch with them.

She had never been the party-going type so most of the time she ended up declining the offers of dating. Not that there were many coming her way, she thought dismally. For her, relationships were serious business and she could not jump in and out of them, as some of her more enterprising colleagues.

In the evening, Zara stopped for coffee with Sumana and Pari who were also her colleagues. Once, Zara had rescued Sumana from a disastrous work-related issue that could have jeopardized both their careers. Since then Sumana trusted her implicitly. They were Zara's

closest friends. They ran to her in times of relationship troubles, referring to her as the 'wise woman'. She loved them in her own quiet way, sharing a bit of her life with them. But today Zara couldn't say a word about the events of the previous day or the revelation of this morning. She doubted they would call her wise ever again, if she told them about the proposal she had defiantly refused!

It was good though to laugh as they discussed the next project they were working on, before Pari regaled them with jokes about her ex-boyfriend.

Back in her own apartment, Zara instantly began to relax. She was able to get into bed by ten after an oil massage to her long lustrous hair and a much deserved shower. Zara had dozed off into a pleasant state of oblivion when her phone rang. She woke up, jolted out of her hard-earned peace when she recognized the deep male voice in her ear.

"Zara?"

Armaan! "Yes?" She wished he had not called her when she was half-asleep and confused, with her defenses down!

"I wanted to discuss a serious matter with you if it is alright." Armaan sounded curt as usual which didn't go down too well with her in the sleepy state she was in.

"Armaan, did you not check the time before calling? It is ... uh ..." she blinked, focused on the clock and said sternly, "... past twelve! Decent, hard working folks sleep by this time you know!"

"It was important, so I had to call. Calling you at work seemed rather rude," he replied coolly.

"How kind of you! What is this urgent thing?" Zara asked, clinging to her wits that were fast slipping away.

"You heard about Mom's proposal? I just wanted to clarify that you should not harbour any such hopes. It was not my idea and I am least interested in such a foolhardy, meaningless alliance," said Armaan in a matter of fact tone.

It galled her to think that he had the temerity to believe that she would be waiting to tie the knot with him! Who did he think he was? How dare he presume that she wasn't good enough for him!

Zara seethed and stewed with the perfect words to upbraid him on the subject but calmed down in time to answer with a sweet acid remark, "You know, I *might* have accepted, if it weren't for your pompous attitude. I refused the proposal this morning. But before you gallop off on that royal steed of yours, please tone down that attitude, will you? You are beginning to sound like a gaseous dirigible. One small prick might bring it all down! Goodnight, Armaan! Unlike the rich and famous, the working class has to get up early for work."

Zara cut the call with a satisfaction that bordered on sheer glee. On that triumphant note, sleep claimed her quickly for the night.

Armaan could not figure out whether he ought to be happy that she had refused the proposal or irked that she had turned it down with such acidic disdain. Anger won over relief. Zara had called him arrogant when she was nothing but!

What had she called him? A gaseous dirigible! A reluctant smile lit those melting dark brown eyes. Well, he had to hand it to her, she was never short of a witty retort. However, it did irk him that it was always aimed at him, sometimes even unfairly. He did not believe he deserved her contempt. Every time he had a conversation with her, it ended in barbed comments and he wondered why it had to be that way.

Armaan set his palette, squeezed out the various colours he needed and began to work at the background. Unfortunately, he was really short of time and would have to get the project done without any more delay. Yesterday's incident in the garden had only helped in cementing his dislike for the woman. The war of wills after that with his mother had only aggravated the problem. He worked steadily through the afternoon and was undisturbed until Aparna came in with large mugs of coffee and sat down on a stool.

She looked around the studio and found several finished nudes by the corner. "Mom is rather upset after yesterday's argument."

"There was no need for an argument. She'll get over it." The frown was back on his brow as he applied a thick layer of impasto on the canvas. The rich, wet purple paint gleamed in the afternoon sunshine that slanted through the windows. Steadily, he merged a shade of

cobalt blue and lead white and the sky burst into life above the emerald landscape.

Aparna was silent for a while, glumly watching him apply another layer of paint with a palette knife. Armaan had always been reserved. They hardly spoke about their parents' divorce but she knew that he had been more affected by it as a child.

"You are unusually quiet?" Armaan said without looking at her. "Still thinking about the will?"

"Yeah," Aparna was not surprised. Her brother always knew what she was thinking. It was sad that he had never wanted to find love, though there was a string of girlfriends who were forgotten promptly like daily newspaper.

"You know, you should consider going back home," he said, quietly wiping the paint from his hands.

"Why? For the money? How am I different from you? And I thought you didn't believe in marriage!" Aparna asked scathingly.

"Not everyone is cut out for marriage. But you have to agree that you and Shiva had something real. He has come to take you home twice. He still cares. If you have something good going for you, why spoil it? You might regret it later, especially when the kids grow up." He put down his brushes and packed up his things as the natural light from the overhead glass ceiling began to diminish in his studio.

Aparna was quiet, thinking about what Armaan had said.

Brother and sister sat beside each other, sipping coffee, each deep in their own thoughts.

"And you?" she asked.

He looked at her with wicked brown eyes and said, "I shall paint till death takes me away, avoiding all species of cacti as long as I live!"

They laughed together at that. The door opened with a swish as the cook came running in, "*Madamji faint ho gayi!*"

Armaan was the first to race ahead, tearing through the door followed by Aparna. They dashed into the house to find the housekeeping staff fanning Vini as she lay on the floor, her face deathly pale.

“Mom, this is blackmail!” He did not want to sound callous but he was being backed into a corner. He bit down on an angry retort, turning to stare out of the sealed window of the ward. He did not want to see how ill his mother looked and kept his eyes focused on the distant tops of the buildings and the hot blazing sun outside the hospital.

A week had passed since Vini had suffered the stroke and she was still under medical care. She had been flitting in and out of consciousness ever since and the doctors had forbidden turbulent emotional reactions.

However, the first thing that she said to her son after she regained a bit of strength was that he should plan for a wedding as soon as possible.

If Armaan had not known how ill his mother really was, it would have appeared like a staged melodrama. He was genuinely concerned by how weak she looked.

“Armaan,” she spoke, resting her head weakly on the raised pillow. “Come and sit with me.” He could hardly avoid such a gentle plea and sat down stiffly.

“I cannot force you to do this. It is a request. I just want to see you happy before I die!”

“Mom! You are not going to die!” he drawled casually. But he was deeply worried by the thought. “What makes you think I would be happier than I am now? And, why the insistence on this particular girl?”

“Zara is very different from the way you perceive her. She understands the value of relationships.” Armaan scowled down at her thinking that his mother was probably so desperate that she was imagining things. Vini caught his hand. He clasped it warmly, the gesture completely in contrast with his scowl.

“I know what loneliness means. Things are never perfect. But we must trust. Don’t base your life on your parents’ experiences. You have a right to be happy and loved. Why do you deny yourself that? I have thought long and hard about it. Zara is the best choice for you. No other woman can stand up to you anyway!” Vini smiled, closing

her eyes briefly.

Armaan swallowed an angry retort. “You know that she has refused once!”

“Zara will say yes, if *you* do!”

“We can hardly see eye to eye without trying to kill each other!” He sighed deeply changing the topic, “Let’s go home, Mom. The doctor has signed the discharge papers. Stop thinking so much! It is not doing you any good. And stop worrying about me! My happiness does not depend on my marital status!”

The topic was raised many times after Vini’s return from the hospital and the issue became such a sore one that it ignited the atmosphere with hard recriminations.

The situation deteriorated and matters came to a head when a couple of days later Vini had a relapse. Armaan was furious, blaming himself for the way he had handled it. He spent the night at the hospital, stewing his brains for a solution. He could never forgive himself if he became the cause for her illness. Slowly he came to the toughest decision of his life as Vini slept under sedation.

The next morning when he went in to see his mother, Armaan knew that he was going to curse himself for what he was about to do. But that did not diminish the relief he felt when he gave his mother the news about his change in decision. Seeing her face wreathed in a smile he hadn’t seen in years was worth it, he thought with finality.

“You will not regret it, Armaan.” His mother hugged him.

“We will see.” He replied quietly.

2

It did not matter in the least who his chosen bride would be as long as his mother was safe and healthy, thought Armaan, as he sat in his studio later that day brooding. He looked at the bare drawing board and cursed his luck.

Zara! He shut his eyes at the thought. He might as well wed a ten-ton truck for all he cared, he thought with grim humour. Nothing reduced the chaos in his mind. His mother had for some reason decided that it would be Zara. What other choice did he have? He didn't know a woman whom he could tolerate for more than a day. A bunch of vapid, shallow faces arose in his mind and he shook his head in horror.

Armaan couldn't afford to have someone *he* liked either. He could do without that complication. There was always the danger of his bride falling in love with him! It was unthinkable! His plan would work only if both the parties were happy about the arrangement. It had to be someone who disliked him for his plan to work.

In fact, now that he had thought this through, Zara would be the perfect bride for him! She loathed him and hardly ever looked at him without that contemptuous look in her grey eyes. Funny, that in a time of crisis like this he should remember the colour of those fantastic eyes! He shook himself free of the distraction and thrashed his plan out for loopholes. After an hour, he was sure of what he wanted to do.

Armaan picked up the phone and dialed Zara's number a second time that fortnight. This time his tone was painstakingly polite.

Zara was in absolute denial. The phone call from Armaan had been a complete shock, hitting her like a bolt of lightning! But it was even worse to have Sudha call her twice to berate her for her apparent lack

of compassion and arrogance. The argument had turned ugly, ending in tears and fireworks, with her aunt claiming that she had expected Zara to be a little more dutiful. It was clearly a matter of ego for Sudha Seth, who did not want to be seen as a selfish woman, appeasing her own daughter Bani's greedy wishes. To hurt an influential friend's sentiments in the process was unthinkable, far more important than any genuine concern for Zara.

Strangely, Zara empathized with her aunt's predicament. She could simply walk away from it all. But she could not! Two things became pivotal in her final decision. One, that her aunt was right in reminding her rather pointedly that Zara was indeed lucky to have had a good life as a child. After her mother's premature death, her aunt had taken the two-year-old Zara under her care only at the insistence of Zara's ailing grandfather. Initially, she had presumed that her aunt was her mother. But it was drummed into her head with subtle persistence that her mother was dead and that she was illegitimate. In those innocent years, she had not understood the meaning of the word and had only craved for the same affection and attention that her cousin Bani had received from Zara's aunt.

When Zara found that it was not forthcoming, she had receded into a shell, thicker than an armour, to defend herself from her adoptive family and the world outside. Her own stubborn resistance and her aunt's lack of affection, combined with Bani's selfishness had turned her into a brooding, unhappy child. Taking pity on her, Ajay Seth, her aunt's husband had sent her off to a boarding school in Shimla.

The burden of obligation had grown heavier as the years had passed and this seemed like the perfect opportunity to pay her aunt back for all that she had done.

The second reason was a strange one, which she need not have considered. But she somehow found it difficult to ignore the ramifications that appeared vital to the whole issue.

Her antagonism towards Armaan stemmed from his callous attitude towards one and all. For the first time however, she instinctively felt that he was not untouched by his mother's condition. In the short, very polite and stilted conversation, he had clearly stated the reason

for his decision to bend to his mother's will. He was doing this because he did not want to see Vini suffer. Somehow, it had lodged a tiny speck of respect in her heart for the man and Zara had decided to grant him his request for a meeting, rather more willingly than she would have otherwise done.

It was decided that Zara would meet Armaan for dinner at a restaurant of her choice. Zara was utterly confused about the terms and conditions, for what he politely referred to as an arrangement. Armaan had sounded courteous, chillingly so, and completely fake as she concluded later. If it had not been for his mother, he had emphasized, he would never have called her.

In theory it sounded lofty and idealistic, but to put it into practice was another matter altogether. How was she supposed to behave with him, now that he had made the first move to be courteous? She decided to play by the same rules and pulled out the most severely formal outfit in her wardrobe.

Armaan stepped out of his gleaming Mercedes, at the entrance of the restaurant Zara had chosen. He wondered if this was the worst day of his life. No, the worst day was yet to come. It would most certainly be the day of the damned wedding! He was having a hard time trying to quell the desire to bolt. The idea of marriage was not in his wildest plans for himself. He could not imagine himself playing husband to any woman, least of all to Zara.

His phone rang. Zara was already waiting for him inside. He grimaced and stepped into the dimly lit romantic setting to see her wave at him from a corner table.

Armaan could hardly see her in the black thing she wore. Clearly, the woman had a penchant for wearing gloomy drapery that covered her from the neck down. He could not ascertain its origin but it looked like a cross between a shroud and a long, loose dress. He wondered what she looked like beneath those voluminous folds of fabric and mentally kicked himself! What did it matter? The terms and conditions he was about to set for her did not include looking beneath the unflattering layers of her dress! In all probability, she was as large as a house and one block of ice from head to toe. Perfect

reason for him to put his plan into action!

He looked at her and felt his eyes ensnared by that direct gaze. In the semi-dark, mood lighting, she looked like a witch with deep grey eyes.

“Nice place,” Armaan said to start a conversation hoping that it would not go wrong.

Zara shrugged, nodding politely, “It is near my house.” Her voice was huskier than usual. He noted the difference in tone. There was a challenge there. However, it was curbed as was the cold light in her shimmering eyes.

“I would like to thank you first, for accepting my proposal at such a short notice.” He kept his tone just as neutral and business-like as hers.

“Let’s discuss the terms and condition before I agree to this, shall we?” Zara said, leaning back on her chair.

It was of course a good idea to discuss it upfront and Armaan cleared his throat when Zara interrupted again. “I won’t be sleeping with you ... and that is my only condition.”

He stared at her as if she had thrown icy water on him. Then anger seized him in the guts at the insult. She had the gall to throw at him bluntly what ... what he had wanted to tell her!

Well, it was still an insult and fury goaded him to say with a sizzling bite, “That is the first of my terms and conditions. You need not worry about that highly unlikely possibility, considering the state of affairs between us. Also, we would be hardly meeting each other in this arrangement.”

“And how do you propose to achieve that when we have to live under the same roof with your family?” Zara sat back, locking her fingers together on the table.

He appeared as if he owned the place, looking every inch the powerful male that he was. His casual corded trousers and pristine cream shirt made him look like a model from the pages of a glossy magazine. But no model could have his charisma, a searing quality that quickened her heartbeat. If she stretched her fingers an inch, she could touch the masculine hand drumming impatiently on the table.

She curled her fingers in. His hair was wildly curly and longer at the nape which now was neatly tied up to give him that usual edgy appearance that made her stomach feel hollow. She had felt this way around him for as long as she could remember.

She knew that beneath the glossy surface he was a stubborn, arrogant man, who was way beyond her reach. Anger was better than any other vulnerable display of emotion. A man like Armaan wouldn't look twice at her even if she wanted him to ... which of course she didn't, she told herself firmly.

Armaan was caught unawares by the flitting emotions in her eyes. There was fire in them and the silvery orbs were almost black unless you saw the reflection of the chandeliers above in their shining depths. An undercurrent in the atmosphere enveloped them. Suddenly he wanted to know what she was thinking ... really thinking ... especially when she was not angry. How would it sound if she laughed gaily. He had never heard her laugh. Always a stilted formal smile ... but never a laugh of pure delight.

He wanted to kick himself when he realized that his train of thought had taken him miles away. He focused back on the subject of discussion. He locked his vision with hers for seconds before leaning forward to make his point. "I intend to shift to my apartment that has been lying locked up for some months; it has several spare bedrooms and a studio on the terrace. That would keep us out of each other's hair and certainly keep things under wraps as I intend to. We will have to make an excuse to shift base after a few weeks. Mom should not know of this arrangement at any cost, do you understand?" It was a warning and they both understood it well.

Zara nodded. She would never be the one to hurt the old woman. Vini was the only one with positive reasons for this marriage.

"The next condition is that this marriage would be terminated as soon as six months are over. By then Mom would surely understand that it was a mistake and she would give up hope for a happy married life for me. You will be rewarded with a handsome alimony, which you certainly deserve. After that we needn't see each other at all."

Zara thought deeply for a while, cringing at the coldblooded points

that he had put in front of her. She could back out now if she wanted. But her aunt's taunting words caught at her principles. She had a different idea about marriage. This arrangement made her shrivel up inside. But it seemed to be the only way she could wipe away the feelings of inadequacy that her aunt's words had aroused in her all her life. Zara would never have to face her with a bowed head knowing that her life was only a result of her aunt's charity.

"Why me?" Zara asked quietly, never taking her eyes off him. "Why not Bani? You have known her all your life."

"For some reason, Mom is convinced that you are perfect marriage material. I have my reservations on the subject."

Armaan saw the angry fire spark brighter in those eyes again. He continued unperturbed "For me you are the perfect candidate because we don't really like each other!"

Zara tried not to wince.

Armaan continued, "I don't think this arrangement would succeed if I married someone I liked and vice versa. That would defeat the purpose, as I have no intention of staying married at all. Marriage is an outdated institution and is used as a smokescreen by most people to satisfy their needs be it physical, emotional or materialistic. I am not interested in it and do not intent to pander to the needs of another human being. I cannot reciprocate the same emotions if a woman foolishly falls in love with me in the process. The damage caused would be irreparable and that I cannot allow! You seem sensible."

"Finally, I agree with you on something. You are right. I am sensible and I do dislike you. It is kind of you to think only of your mother and sacrifice your noteworthy principles for her!" She shrugged, smiling coldly.

"Are you being contemptuous when you seem to want the same from me?"

"I don't want anything from you. Not even your generous offer of a much-touted alimony." She seemed to look within for a few moments and then said, "I want to take off the burden of obligation towards my aunt. I am ready to marry you because she wants to wash her hands

off me as soon as possible. I have nothing against her,” she shook her head. “At least after this I might be allowed to lead an independent life without being berated for being a burden on her.”

In a flash Armaan saw a fragile vulnerability suddenly shorn of all anger. Maybe he was imagining things! He wanted to probe further against his will but curbed the urge. It wasn't his business anyway. And knowing her, he felt that she would probably shut him out. They were both silent for a while and then Armaan said in a matter-of-fact manner, “We might as well order something to eat.”

They ate in silence for the next half an hour. After the meal, they discussed the dates to be set for the engagement and the wedding according to the convenience of their official calendars. They sat consulting their schedules as if it were nothing more than a dentist's appointment. Zara felt a mixture of sadness and anger at the lack of emotional involvement in the whole process. What should have been the most important day of her life did not seem any better than an auditors' seminar, she reflected cynically. At least he seemed courteous enough to include her need for preparation for the day.

Armaan insisted that the wedding should commence before the month was over. Zara raised her eyebrows at such inordinate haste. He replied rather moodily, that it is what his mother wished for. In the end, Zara agreed that there was no use delaying the event. She might as well get it over with as soon as possible and get on with her life.

“Well, that's it then. I will discuss and finalize everything and inform you as soon as possible. Call me if there is any change in the plans,” he said, signing the bill as the waiter brought it over.

They rose from the table together and Armaan could not help but notice that she barely came up to his shoulders. For a moment he stood and watched her through hooded eyes as she picked up her handbag. He couldn't put a finger on what it was that arrested his attention every time they met. There was an unconscious grace and dignity in her movements. The tilt of her head was pure haughtiness as she sailed ahead of him towards the door.

Armaan held the door open before she could reach for it. Zara

moved away jerkily to avoid his muscled frame as he followed her out into the night. She could not stop the thudding of her heart when his cologne hit her senses.

“Well, I should be going now. Keep me informed about things,” she said coolly.

“Come, I will drop you home.” He strode towards the car, expecting her to follow him.

She wasn’t going to sit with him inside the close confines of the car!

“Don’t bother! I will take a taxi,” she called out rather testily.

Armaan lowered his voice to keep it steady, “I said I will drop you home!”

“No thanks!”

“Why not?” He came closer and glowered down on her.

“I don’t need your help,” she said enunciating each word with a calm she hardly felt.

Armaan watched the mutinous tilt of her chin and the lips compressed into a thin line. He waited for five minutes with her trying to hail an elusive cab or an auto-rickshaw. None of them seemed to stop just when she needed one desperately, thought Zara.

Armaan stood leaning on his car and shook his head. “You can stand here flailing your arms for a taxi all night if you want, but I am not moving from here until you come with me!”

“Why are you so concerned? I am not your problem!”

“I wish you were not, but you are, from the moment you agreed to marry me!” he drawled.

“So, are you going to tell me what to do all the time?” Zara asked with a forced smile.

“I can see that you can’t seem to understand good reasoning!” he pounced, without a trace of remorse, “You are a stubborn woman. I don’t think it is safe for you to travel alone at this time.”

“Stubborn? Well, if it is not the pot calling the kettle black! You think you are a paragon of virtues. Why do you insist on standing there lecturing me? I can take care of myself!” Zara was beginning to feel the usual stirring of antagonism at his highhanded comment.

His smile was a slash of pure derisive contempt, “Of course, you can take care of yourself! Dressed for the funeral, or is it a custom-made costume for Bat-woman? You are hardly likely to get any unwanted attention!”

She was stunned by the insolence in his tone but then struck back, “Why, Mr. Malhotra? Don’t I seem like the best candidate to be your bride? At least I am not underdressed like one of your arm candies or those scrawny models you paint so diligently at your studio? The way I dress is none of your business! Stop calling me names!”

“You didn’t seem to have a problem calling me a gaseous dirigible.”

“You are one!” Zara shrugged with a nonchalance she didn’t feel.

Armaan was getting tired of the argument. “Alright, fine, I am a dirigible and you are a brave Batwoman and we are both a pot and a kettle and any assortment of vessels that you want it to be! Now get in the car!”

Armaan was fascinated by the colour on her cheeks.

“I’ll walk home!” she huffed.

Then she turned around and stalked off. He was right behind her taking her arm in a tight grip.

“Get in the car, Zara!” he said grimly. “You are not going alone!”

“Yes I am!”

“Alright, I apologize! Just get in the car! Or I’ll walk with you!”

She paused when she noticed several people staring at them. Not wanting to make a scene, she swung around and hissed at him. “Let go of my arm and I will come.” He let go and she followed him back to the car. Fuming through her ears, she got in and shut the door with a splintering bang.

“Go easy on it, will you?” he said, with his temper tightly leashed this time as he got behind the wheel.

Zara gave him the address and for the next fifteen minutes neither of them spoke. She wondered what they would do after the marriage. Perhaps the best solution was to shift to two different planets where she would never have to see him again. The moment they reached her apartment building, she stormed out without a ‘Thank you’ and he drove off without a backward glance.

Things began to move very fast for Zara after that. She was pained to see Vini looking frail when she came to visit her. She congratulated Zara for accepting the proposal, welcoming her heartily into the family. Zara was dumbstruck when her mother-in-law lovingly touched her head. The conversation that followed shook her deeply.

“I know you are the perfect bride for him.” Vini said beaming, “You have strength of character that demands respect! You know how to stand up to him. He may say all kinds of silly things pretending to be uncaring but he has a good heart. He has had a rough childhood. Some kids grow into healthy adults in spite of a broken past. But Armaan couldn’t get out of it unscathed. He loved and respected his father deeply and that trust was broken. For Armaan an inspiring figure was tarnished beyond repair. He learned to shut out everyone after that. He doesn’t trust anyone. You have to earn his trust. Help him heal. Only you can do that! All you need is a little empathy between the two of you to push this marriage forward and things will be fine.”

Zara could only nod silently as the conversation veered towards the wedding trousseau, both relieved and saddened that Vini was going to be heartbroken in the next few months. As for her own emotional health, Zara thought it wise to keep her heart safe by not getting too involved in Armaan’s life.

From then on things rushed headlong, beginning from the shopping required for the wedding and the umpteen visits to the clothes boutiques and jewelry stores all in the span of two hectic days.

Zara’s aunt went berserk with the arrangements for the engagement. With her usual flair for dramatics, she outdid even Bani, who sulked all day in her room claiming a headache.

Soon Zara found herself sandwiched between her aunt, her future mother-in-law and Aparna and her two children, who were to ‘help’ her find the right attire for the engagement and the perfect trousseau for the wedding two weeks later. In a whirlwind of shopping and taking measurements at Aparna’s own boutique, Zara found herself nodding her head in sheer exasperation, to all the items that were flourished in front of her for approval. She just didn’t care about how

she looked for this circus. All she wanted was to escape to somewhere quiet where there would be no arguments and discussions on rituals, price tags, designer labels, and all the paraphernalia of a fancy fast-forward wedding.

The only thing that gave Zara satisfaction was that she was able to pay for many of the items without a twinge of guilt about the expenses. She was independent and could bear the expenses. Zara had proudly insisted on paying, politely brushing aside her mother-in-law's requests about wanting to pay for the whole trousseau. Not wanting to be left behind, Aunt Sudha bought her an exorbitant set of pearls. As the other wedding expenses were shared by both the families Zara stopped her from any more extravagance.

Zara was beginning to be torn with guilt about the sham she was enacting. She liked her mother-in-law and felt like a cheat buying a beautiful trousseau for a fake wedding. She might as well pay for it herself, she thought, trying to ease a bit of the guilt that was eating into her.

After breakfast, on the morning of the engagement, Zara sat in a frozen state in the balcony of her room in her aunt's house where the small formal ceremony would be held, only for family and close relatives. Her aunt had come in twice to check with her about what was keeping her so long. She walked about the room restlessly, sipping hot lemon tea. The rich burgundy and gold *lehenga* with its gold embroidered organza *dupatta* lay untouched on the bed. The tiny gold sequins and glossy pearls seemed to mock at her. Aparna had selected this one specifically for today. The rest of the dresses were still to be stitched and altered according to her size for the wedding.

The silk slithered sensuously between her fingers. It was beautiful and she wondered if it would suit her. All her life, she had lived frugally, her pride preventing her from asking for more than what her guardians had provided. The habit had stuck through her teenage years into womanhood and even though she was well-placed in her firm, she still did not pay too much attention to her dressing.

After a long mental debate she had decided to inform a few of her friends and colleagues about her wedding. She had always kept a low

profile and didn't feel that a pseudo wedding was the occasion to change that. She told her best pals Sumana and Pari, cutting out the truth about the contract. For them it was real and after loud shrieks of enthusiasm, teary hugs and much talking about female solidarity, they dragged Zara to a classy lingerie shop for 'girls alone' shopping.

Armaan's contemptuous comment on her dressing sense had irked her. Now she wondered why she dressed in drab clothes at all. It was partly due to a lack of interest in fashion and partly to hide the deep-seated insecurities about her body, she acknowledged. She was quite rounded, she thought morosely, looking critically at herself in the mirror. She was relieved that the marriage was not real as she would never have been able to match up with someone as good-looking as her future husband.

"Admiring yourself in the mirror?"

Zara raised troubled eyes and met Bani's dark ones glittering with malice. Not wanting to start the day with another battle with her cousin, she turned towards the bathroom.

Bani moved swiftly to block her way. "What did you do to him, you slut? Just a few days back, he was all mine. We were lovers and suddenly he wants to marry a nobody like you?"

Her spiteful words managed to disturb Zara deeply though she maintained a calm exterior. Why had Armaan not told her this? She was angry that he had such little respect for the women in his life. Perhaps the only one he did care about was his mother.

"Look, Bani," she said pasting a smile on her face, "whatever questions you have about this issue should be addressed to Armaan. He never mentioned it and I do not care! Maybe he was through with you and wanted a pleasant change!"

"You can laugh for all I care," sneered Bani, "Don't ever be under the misconception that it would change anything between Armaan and me. You don't have it in you to keep any man, let alone a man like Armaan! He is probably regretting all this at this very moment. If it were not for his stupid mother, none of this would have happened! Enjoy it while it lasts!"

"I most certainly will!" said Zara with a flippancy she was far from

feeling.

White with fury, Bani stormed out of the room. She would not allow her shallow cousin to ruin her day, thought Zara, calming herself. She went in for a bath and came out feeling a little better ... only to find that her day was completely ruined!

On the bed lay her lovely dress as she had left it. The only difference was the large wet, black patch in the centre of the *lehenga* and *choli*! With something almost akin to murderous rage, she touched the patch with her fingers. The ink dyed her hennaed hands and she almost cried out in pain at the sacrilege. Of course she knew who had done this!

Zara had half a mind to challenge Bani right then! However, she knew enough about her aunt's tendency to be unfairly partial. It would be a waste of time and energy. She could hear the laughter and chatter of the guests downstairs, the song and dance among the women, as she stood without a clue about how to solve the problem without killing Bani.

No one would believe her! There was no solution, she had nothing appropriate enough to wear at such short notice. The other dresses were still at the boutique and the blouses for the brand new saris were yet to be stitched. Since she had shifted to her own apartment, there were hardly any dresses left here at her aunt's residence. Not that it would have helped as her wardrobe consisted only of a few plain silk saris in grey and mauve and other sober shades, with comfortable blouses. She flung open her old cupboard to inspect the items she had left behind. The *salwar kameezes* though relatively new appeared suddenly unsuitable for anything but casual wear. She slumped down on the floor hovering on the brink of a deluge.

She jumped up gritting her teeth and looked through her wardrobe once more in despair. Her eyes alighted on a little gleam of screaming orange colour tucked away at the back. She pulled it out grimacing, wondering if she was demented enough to attempt it.

The orange blast-in-your-face attire was a gift from a friend's father whom she deeply respected. Zara had helped him as a personal favour to her friend, with the tax auditing for his local garment factory. It

had been gifted with a lot of affection and she had never been able to discard it. Zara had kept it as a souvenir and it had lain untouched at the back of her wardrobe.

She ironed out the creases with a deep sense of foreboding. Pacifying herself with a lecture that it was not a real engagement anyway and hoping fervently that people would not notice the cheap tinsels smattered liberally across the shiny fabric, she began to get dressed.

Aparna was the first one to snigger, her mouth agape at the sight. Zara walked in through the door and a hush fell on the small gathering. There was a giggle from Bani standing close to a furious Armaan.

“Oops! I think I need my glares!” Bani trilled.

“Why didn’t she wear the dress we bought for the engagement?” Aparna whispered, stifling a bubble of incredulous laughter.

“Bet, she wanted to stand out in the crowd on her special day!” chortled Bani maliciously.

Armaan stewed in silence, utterly disgusted by the sight. Why had she done this? She was probably trying to humiliate him. Revenge! That seemed to be the only reason for such an act of complete defiance. The flaming orange, Chinese silk *salwar kameez* with its multitudes of folds smocked at the chest and the puffed sleeves made her look like a giant marigold. It was heavily embroidered with cheap mirror work and tinsels, the golden thread making it highly ostentatious and gaudy. The elegant *kundan* necklace looked mismatched with her loud dress.

He glowered at Bani when she giggled a third time as Zara touched the feet of the elderly guests for their blessings. The only thing that seemed right was her hair. It was pure silk, he noted, arrested by the sight, though only mildly appeased. It was left open, cascading down her back all the way down to her hips. Thank God, for small mercies he thought bitterly! Zara touched his mother’s feet with a grace he couldn’t deny and lifted her eyes to him, adjusting her gaudy gold *dupatta*. Their eyes met for several seconds and she hastily averted hers. For a fleeting moment, he thought he saw a need for approval. It

was masked so quickly that he dismissed the silly thought. Zara would not need anyone's approval. Her eyes shone with a steely glint as she moved ahead to meet another relative.

"You must get the designer's name. Might get you splendid business for your boutique!" Bani was irrepressible.

Aparna shook her head in disbelief and whispered again, "We don't deal in upholstery! Where did she get the dress anyway? From the Nizam of Bijapur's palace furnishings?"

"That is enough!" Armaan cut in. He stepped forward grimly to stand beside his would-be bride as the cameras flashed.

Once the rings were exchanged and the rituals were over, everyone relaxed and chatted with the couple over steaming hot delicacies. Vini was by Zara's side most of the time. Armaan could see that they were getting along better than he expected. More than once, he saw Zara holding his mother's hand and smiling happily. She looked radiant when she smiled. Her lips were lush and pink he noted, vaguely distracted. He had hardly spoken to her himself, not trusting himself to say a word without exploding into a tirade.

He did get a chance to speak with her once while having lunch and gritted out to her in a low voice, "You seem hell-bent on insulting me in public!"

Zara was stunned by the suppressed fury in his tone and looked at him with a challenge. "What have I done *now* to irk the emperor?"

"Don't be condescending! Why didn't you dress appropriately?"

"Are we going to argue everyday about what I wear for the next six months?" Her anger equally matched his.

He curbed an oath. "Do you have to be so defiant all the time?"

"Exactly! Is it so relevant that you should chew on my brains at this moment over what I am wearing?"

He made a sound that indicated that he might lose his temper altogether if he didn't move away. "God, give me patience!"

She looked heavenward dramatically and sighed "Dear God, I need it more than him!" They glowered at each other, both unwilling to back down.

"Are you children having a good time?" Vini poked into their

conversation, noting their grim expressions.

“Yes, thank you!” So saying, Zara rose asking sweetly, “Shall I get a bowl of *badaam kheer* for him? He needs to sweeten his tongue a bit!” She sailed away without looking back.

“She is perfect for you, Armaan! Didn’t I tell you?” Vini beamed happily while her son choked on his food that suddenly tasted like soggy wallpaper. He chewed and swallowed with utmost care, thoroughly disgruntled with the bunch of stubborn women in his life!

3

Two days before the wedding, her clothes were delivered complete with their accessories to a bemused Zara. She had never owned so many pretty things in all her life. Wiser with her hard earned experience, she put them away safely under lock and key this time. After the engagement, another ugly scene had erupted with Bani who had only laughed at Zara's predicament.

The wedding day arrived and Zara wondered where the days in between had disappeared. She was going to be Armaan's wife. It seemed like an impossible dream. After the engagement fiasco, Armaan had called her once, to check with her for the customary jewels required for the occasion. She had simply extended her apologies saying that she could not accompany him as she had a mountain of work to do before she could apply for a week's leave for the wedding. Zara pointed out with relish that since her aesthetic sense was below his superior standards, he might as well choose whatever he felt was appropriate and not bother her with such trivial issues.

"You look fabulous!" Pari was gushing. Her friends showered her with effusive compliments as she stood admiring herself in the mirror, turning this way and that to get a better look. The previous night had been nothing short of torture with the *sangeet* ceremony, singing and dancing among the relatives and friends who had gathered in the house. Her day had been even more hectic with the visit to the luxury spa and salon with Aparna who had taken over the matter into her own hands. Zara had protested strongly, but in the end she had given up since it seemed too much of an effort to convince her sister-in-law without revealing that it was not a real marriage.

Now, standing in front of the mirror, Zara had to admit that she did

feel a tingle of pleasure at the remarkable improvement in her appearance. Her friends crowded around her, arranging the sari for her. It was Armaan's choice, Vini had informed her, when she had called to thank her mother-in-law for the gift. The lotus-pink *Banarasi* silk sari was delicately embellished with tiny Swarovski crystals and shimmering pearls, making her eyes appear stunningly luminous. She felt the first stirrings of excitement at the sight she presented in the mirror. Her long silken hair was well coiffed and spangled with specks of pearls and diamante bead hairpins.

In the glow of the dressing table lamps, her face suddenly appeared happy as if this day was real for her. Somewhere deep inside, she wished Armaan would notice her if only for today. As quickly as it arose, she extinguished the thought.

Zara had always been pragmatic, a quality she diligently nurtured. Now was the time to use it to her advantage. At best, they could work out an amiable relationship in the coming months. To hope for any kind of appreciation was downright suicidal.

"Time to go!" Her aunt came in to inform them that the *baraat* had arrived. She could hear the shouting, singing, the drums and the music. Slowly she turned with a smile. She was going to enjoy her wedding.

Armaan glanced for the umpteenth time at his brand new wife and felt something crackle to life deep within. It was not meant to happen this way, he grimaced. It was like being punched in the guts inside a boxing ring while his hands were tied. But he couldn't deny that Zara looked absolutely gorgeous in that colour. It *had* to be the colour! The lotus pink suited her. The heavy silk sari was gracefully swathed around her, the vibrant shade giving her a delicate rosy glow. He saw that she was not exactly as shapeless, as he had presumed earlier. She did have a neat waistline and her hips swayed enticingly when she walked. He had torn his eyes away immediately in grim resolve when she came nearer, not wanting to appear like a clod who could not keep his mouth shut.

The photographers swarmed the venue and he felt like an idiot gawking at his bride. She seemed like a different person altogether.

On his sister's insistence, he had chosen the sari with a resigned air at the boutique without a second thought. The pearls on her neck and wrists made her look heavenly. He was stunned when he saw her coming towards him with that fiery challenge in her grey eyes, eyes that seemed to have taken on a new shade of silvery light. It was there in the way she carried herself, in the tilt of her chin and the long slender neck. He did not even know she had a neck for goodness sake! She was regal in her wedding finery and he could not have asked for more. The thought plunged him unceremoniously into a gloomy black mood!

Zara was breathless with the sheer excitement of being the center of attention. She made sure that she avoided looking at Armaan though it was not easy when several people came to wish them. She did not want to remember the heart-stopping moment when his eyes were transfixed on her for several seconds at the beginning of the ceremony. The knowledge that she had managed to appear perfect was enough to make her believe that this time he could not find fault with her.

Her own eyes had been glued at the sight of her tall magnificent bridegroom, dressed in a striking deep ochre *bandhgala* and bronze ornamented silk turban. It made him appear austere and royal at the same time. He had finally shaved for the wedding, sporting a clean jaw that made him look spectacular. Zara would have reached up to spread a hand on that smooth masculine cheek if only she could! His dark eyes were hooked on her as she stepped beside him. She had hastily averted her awed gaze, afraid that he might guess how deeply he affected her. After that, she had only concentrated on the people around her as if she was somehow the sole participant of this wedding, smiling and laughing with everyone, as though she was truly happy.

Zara did have moments of terrible uncertainty at being part of such a farce. Her hand trembled when it was placed in his larger, stronger ones during the ceremony as a sign of union. Her eyes welled up unexpectedly while the priests explained the meaning of each sacred vow, chanting the holy *mantra* that joined them in matrimony. He

had clasped her trembling hand in his firm grip, which was unusually comforting, as they walked around the holy fire, culminating in a shower of flowers and blessings from the guests. Later, during the reception when the endless line of people wished them, her mother-in-law hugged her with a genuine affection that Zara had not received in a long time. She was goaded by the urgent need to blurt out an apology and the truth about the marriage to her.

However aunt Sudha's words that she was finally relieved of her responsibility confirmed Zara's belief that her decision was for the best. She did nevertheless hug her aunt on an impulse.

The reception finally wound up sometime after midnight. It was almost three in the morning by the time the rest of the rituals and the *grihapraves* concluded at Armaan's house. Zara was exhausted. She pushed the uncomfortable thought that they would eventually have to face each other away. As Armaan had clearly explained, they would shift to his apartment to avoid any uncomfortable questions anyone might ask about the real nature of their relationship.

Zara was at last shown into the bridal chamber, by Aparna, her mother-in-law and several other giggling women. Mercifully, Armaan was nowhere in sight. The last she had seen him was in the bedecked car on their way home. She refrained from asking anyone about his whereabouts, as she sorely wanted some solitude.

After the women left, Zara slumped in front of the ornate dressing table and breathed deeply. It was over! She was married ... to a man who did not care who she was or what she felt. Suddenly all the excitement of the day drained away and she faced reality in the cold light of cynical clarity. Her attention was drawn to the beautifully decorated room. How angry everyone would be if they knew the truth. Strings of tiny fairy lights lit up the windows and the terrace beyond the balcony and the perfumed candles and the scent of hundreds of red, pink and white roses drenched her senses.

This was Armaan's bedroom. It was magnificent in its muted décor, fitted with the latest gadgets. And yet it had an emptiness that spoke volumes about the sole occupant. She peeped inside the spacious walk-in-wardrobe, large enough to accommodate an entire range of

clothes and shoes. The bed itself was huge and covered in scented roses and buds of jasmine over cream and beige satin sheets. The riot of colourful flowers that hung on strings from the ceiling alongside a canopy of gauzy red drapery made her nervous about the night ahead.

Zara's visits to his house had been restricted to the drawing room. She had never imagined that she would ever become the mistress of this household one day. Gloomily she acknowledged that after her brief impersonal stint at being his wife, things would revert to the way they were. What a farce, she thought without humour, saddened that her choice did not involve anything more permanent than the flowers that would die by the first light of the morning sun. With a sigh, her hand reached up to remove the first of the many hairpins from her hair.

She bathed, changed into her nightgown, a simple ivory satin one that covered her from neck to toe and a matching robe. It would be embarrassing to be seen in anything more revealing as she did not intend to appear anything but aloof with him. Zara could wear her 'Batwoman' dress, she thought with wry humour, trying to relieve some of the tension she felt at sharing the same bed with Armaan. That would probably irk him so much that he might want to make a hasty exit with his customary dour look, leaving the bed all to her.

It was in the wee hours of the morning that she heard Armaan enter the darkened room. She had been asleep for over an hour when she heard the rustle of clothes and the soft clicking of the bathroom door. She lay motionless, suddenly alert and breathless. She heard him come out of the shower. Instantly she closed her eyes, pulling up the covers gingerly over her head without any overt movement.

Armaan padded about softly for a while and then there was a sudden dip in the bed on the other side. There was a muffled oath when she felt the strings of roses hung from the ceiling snap under his weight. She heard him switch on the bedside lamp and there were sounds of threads snapping away sharply. She sneaked a look at him. He was dressed in a pair of comfortable shorts and a T shirt. Annoyance defined his sharp jaw and the glint in his eyes. For an

instant, he looked like those ancient warrior kings who roamed the land making bloody conquests. She swallowed hard as the all too familiar female reaction shook her. Her eyes took in the broad shoulders, the lean hips and muscled thighs. She averted her eyes towards the ceiling.

“Sorry for waking you up,” he said with a fierce look of annoyance on his face, snapping the rest of the flower decorations in quick, efficient movements. “The damn things are littered all over the place. It is impossible to sleep with these infernal things hanging over me!”

Zara rose silently to remove them from her side. The last of the scented petals were brushed away methodically from the bed and within no time the decorations had been cleared away. Not having much to say, they stared at each other across the bed.

“I guess it is better now. Goodnight!” Armaan sank into the bed on his side after switching off the bed lamp.

She lay still until all was silent. Slowly she became aware of the sounds of his even breathing and sighed. The wedding night was over, she thought dryly. And she slept without another thought to interrupt that slumber.

The next morning Zara woke up to find Armaan gone. At least she had the room to herself. Zara found Armaan at the breakfast table and to keep up pretences she gave him a bright plastic smile. He informed her briefly about having work at the studio and promptly disappeared for the rest of the day. The day was hectic with several guests visiting the newlyweds.

She was irritated with him when he didn't turn up even in the evening when more friends and relatives poured in to wish the bride and the groom. He became conspicuous by his absence for the next three days, only surfacing for dinner, adding to the aggravation of his family, especially his mother. Vini expressed her displeasure on his behavior at dinner that night and gave him a list of compulsory events to be attended for the next few days.

Zara was miffed, not to mention, very tired by all the new faces she had to remember, but kept her counsel only for the sake of her mother-in-law, who was kinder than anyone she had known. She was

quite relieved that the same routine followed every night with Armaan coming in only after she had retired for the night without a word spoken between them except a nod of acknowledgement in the morning before he left.

The invitation to a friend's dinner party was postponed twice then ultimately agreed upon by a reluctant Armaan at the insistence of his mother. That evening Zara dressed with more care than usual, acutely aware of her shortcomings as Armaan's bride.

Armaan came home early in the evening and found her standing in front of the mirror with her hair spilling down her back. He had made a grave mistake by presuming that she was unattractive! He noted the curve of her waistline as she turned to retrieve the hair brush. Involuntarily, his hand curled into a fist, wiping out a sudden need to touch her smooth skin. It was becoming rather impossible to ignore her presence in his bed. If it had not been for the dinner party tonight, he would have spent another evening at the studio and only returned when the bedroom lights were out. Last night had been particularly difficult. He had come in to find Zara sound asleep in the middle of the bed, her beautiful hair spread like a satin cloud on his pillow. It had taken considerable effort not to touch the silken strands.

He stood for a moment, with his eyes shuttered, noting the lovely wine red silk sari that she wore with innate grace and dignity. Then his eyes met hers and he turned away.

Zara wondered if she was not dressed appropriately again. With him, she never knew what to think or how to act! He hadn't said a word about whether she looked all right. Not a word about the wedding day, when she had known that she could not have looked better! Well, he can grumble some more if she was not up to his pompous, haughty standards. Zara's heart skipped a beat when he came out of the shower wearing a pair of denim shorts that left little to the imagination. He stepped into the walk-in wardrobe, shutting the sliding door.

When he re-emerged after ten minutes she was already tidying away the clothes that were strewn around.

“You don’t need to do all this. I can take care of my things,” he said curtly, slipping on a black and silver silk tie over a fine night blue shirt. He looked devastating in his dark suit and she wondered if he ever looked out of place in anything he wore.

“I was only trying to clear up quickly,” she said, just as stiffly.

“Well, you don’t have to. This is a temporary arrangement and you should not be taking it too seriously. Don’t get used to being the dutiful daughter-in-law either! Oh, and you can start packing after a day or two. We are shifting to my apartment by the weekend after I have had a chance to convince mom on the subject.”

Oh, the arrogance! She fumed in useless anger, sitting rigidly on the plush sofa, waiting for him to finish with his tie, which seemed to be taking longer than she expected.

“I know what I need to do. However, if you want my cooperation in this drama, then you should pay attention to the formalities. Mom has been asking pretty uncomfortable questions since the wedding, wondering why you haven’t been home like all obedient, newlywed, bridegrooms besotted with their brand new wives.” Zara threw at him with a cold smile.

“I have done what she asked me to. Besides, if we have to get a legal separation we must prove that we are incompatible in every way. She also needs to understand that I am not going to babysit my wife all day. I have enough work to keep me busy.” Armaan twirled his tie in exasperation as the knot tangled unmanageably. “Don’t get involved in unnecessary discussions with Mom. I don’t want to warn you again on that.”

Irritation gave way to fury when Zara heard those haughty words. She rose gracefully and stood in front of him. “Allow me,” she purred softly taking the tangled knot in her hands. He was so close that she could see the brown orbs of his eyes that quickly masked his surprise.

Slowly, unable to resist the urge, Zara slid up the knot inexorably tightening the silk noose around his neck without blinking. “Up or down?” she asked softly, slowly becoming aware of the incredible masculine scent of him mingled with some exotic musk aftershave.

His eyes gleamed with challenge, letting her tighten the knot

further, until he felt her hands settle unsteadily under his chin. Then he said in a growl that sent goose bumps skittering across her skin. "Whatever you have in mind, I am game, if you are."

With that loaded statement he lifted his hand and clasped a fistful of her long lustrous mane, splaying the silken strands between his fingers gently as if they were insubstantial as dandelions. Mesmerized by her closeness, unable to resist the temptation, he placed his hand on the bare skin of her waist ever so gently.

Zara stood transfixed by the molten gaze. A reluctant admiration gleamed in her eyes at the way he had turned the tables on her by deliberately misconstruing her words. Her eager body burst to life. She would die if he knew how his hand was wreaking havoc on her senses. With a smile that was a masterpiece, seemingly unaffected by the impact of his sensuality, Zara stood her ground and released his tie. Still smiling, she undid the knot with precise dexterous fingers and fit it neatly into his collar. She tried not to notice how broad and solid his chest was beneath her nimble fingers and how warm his skin felt.

"It's done," Zara said unable to keep the husky tremor from her voice though she managed to remain smiling.

Armaan did not release her. Instead, he stepped in closer. His senses reeled with the impact of her feminine scent. Her lips looked inviting enough for him to be tempted to ... An insane hunger to taste them clenched him by the guts. If he put out his arms she would be within the circle of his embrace. His blood began to thrum with the desire to do exactly that and more. He extinguished the thought immediately. It was one thing to threaten to seduce her to win the situation. And it was another thing altogether to fall into the honey trap that she represented.

He released her gently, still looking into her flushed face. "You sure know how to tie a man in knots."

For a moment, she thought he was actually paying her a compliment! But he continued huskily, "But you need practice. The tie is perfectly done though. Thank you." Armaan brushed the knuckles of his hand on her cheek. The look of challenge was mutual,

he noted with satisfaction and stepped back from her to turn away. He wore his jacket with a flourish and ran a hand through his hair.

Zara realized she was trembling from head to toe after that close encounter though she was loath to reveal her true feelings.

“Shall we go then?” Armaan asked mockingly, offering her his arm.

“Of course,” said Zara, through teeth gritted tight and sailed ahead of him ignoring his proffered arm.

Life settled into a rhythm once the excitement of the wedding seeped away from the household. Zara adjusted quickly to the routine of being Armaan’s invisible wife and Vini’s loving daughter-in-law, quite efficiently. To her relief Aparna was civil though stiffly formal. The children were most easy to get along with. Absolutely impish, the two of them became a comfort to her.

Zara was also surprised to note that Armaan was very fond of them. His unabashed affection for the little ones was in complete contrast with his usual callous attitude. Sometimes she would covertly watch him playing football in the garden or gamboling on the grass to the utter delight of the children who tumbled over him in abandon.

Zara began to love the comfort of having a family although they had not been a part of her life a few weeks ago. Work was still a sanctuary for her as Zara resumed going to office as soon as her leave was over.

Armaan broached the subject with Vini about moving out to his apartment rather tentatively. Vini was aghast, promptly giving a stringent lecture to her ‘heartless’ son on the joys of living with a large family. He could only seethe, waiting until Vini was in a better frame of health. After all it had been only a few weeks since her near fatal illness.

Armaan decided to bide his time. The setback was swallowed stoically by Zara who was beginning to feel a conflicting range of emotions concerning the issue. She was beginning to love being a part of a family too much.

She returned home with a splitting headache one evening and walked straight to her room after excusing herself from the dinner table. She saw Armaan look up from his meal. Vini was concerned

and sent up some hot soup and medication. Zara was touched, realizing with a pang, that it had been a very long time since someone had cared for her.

After a bath, she swallowed the painkiller and settled down with her laptop on the couch. Within minutes her head dipped and she dozed with her laptop still on.

When Armaan entered the room, he stopped short at the sight of Zara sleeping on the sofa. He tried to ignore her as usual. It was impossible! Well almost, he decided firmly. She was the last person he needed to befriend. He showered and changed before slipping into bed.

He was about to switch off the light when he saw Zara turn on the sofa, her position now precarious. If she turns once more, she might slip off. Well, good for her! That would teach her not to mess with him, he thought grumpily. He had not forgotten the challenge in her eyes when she had tightened the tie around his neck like a noose. It had enraged him, challenged him to strike back ... aroused him enough to crush her beneath him and make love ... He shook his head at the thoughts that were leading him in the direction he had been trying to avoid. Every time their eyes met, every time Zara was in the same room she was able to arouse such paradoxical emotions in him that he had to question the feasibility of this marriage.

She slept so peacefully that he could not resist the urge to study her more closely. It was only curiosity, he told himself, as he padded softly to stand in front of her. He noted the idle way her silken hair drifted about her face. The silk baby blue pajamas were ludicrously loose, floating about her with sleeves that were longer than her arms. She seemed to have a wardrobe full of clothes larger than her size.

Shutting the laptop he began to turn away, when she moved and would have fallen off the couch if he hadn't lunged forward to hold her. She curled up into a ball and shivered, cuddling into the sofa with his arm still under her.

This was a stupid idea, Armaan thought with a scowl. "Zara!" He tried to shake her awake but she was sound asleep, though she seemed to be digging into the sofa. He touched her forehead and

realized that she was running a mild fever.

“Zara!” he called more firmly but to no avail. She must be cold, he thought, suddenly concerned at the way she trembled. He removed his arm gently from under her and switched off the AC. When he returned, she was still sleeping soundly. There was no other way but to pick her up and lay her on the bed.

Armaan hesitated and then picked her up in his arms. She was incredibly soft! Her hair trailed around them and her arm fell away. For moments, he stood rooted with her in his arms without a clue as to what had hit him. Gritting his teeth at his own folly, he walked with her cushioned against his chest and laid her on the bed. She was still fast asleep, hardly moving, when he covered her with the sheet. With a little sigh, her lips parted. Armaan was mesmerized. He leaned over her with his elbows on either side of her shoulders. She looked so ... sweet when she slept. Gone was the steely look. Nor was there any anger that could mar those symmetrical features in disharmony.

Her lips were full and inviting and he felt the pull. Tentatively he raised a finger to her bottom lip and traced a moist line on its plump softness. He bent slowly, his eyes only on her parted lips, giving in to heady temptation at last. He was only a hungry breath away from her mouth when Zara stirred. He drew back immediately, furious with himself. What was wrong with him?

Zara felt a warm weight on her thigh and hip. Her throat was parched and she opened her eyes to see Armaan leaning over her with a startling look. His face was drawn into a harsh mask of disapproval. She struggled up into a sitting position.

“You ...” she said in a sleepy voice.

“Do you make it a habit to sleep anywhere that takes your fancy? You almost fell off the sofa and I had to carry you here.”

“How kind ...” she croaked, in a dry whisper, wishing she could sound stern.

“Are you unwell? You have a fever.”

“Yeah ... well ... actually I have a headache.”

“You should take some medication, before you spread it to others!”

“It is just a headache and not some incurable, contagious disease!”

Armaan handed her an analgesic for the fever with a glass of water which she took from his hand as if he were offering her hemlock. She drank the water thirstily and turned away pummeling the pillows with her fists before sinking into them. The lights were switched off. In the darkness, she heard the rustling of the bedcovers and then silence prevailed. Zara felt herself tremble when she felt his broad back against hers. Why was he sleeping so close? She realized it was her fault as she was sleeping right in the middle of the bed. She shivered again at the thought of being in his arms. Oh why hadn't she been awake! It was mortifying to be in need of any help from him.

On second thoughts, she would have probably yelled at him if she had woken up while she was being carried. She sighed, acutely aware of his solid back against hers. It was comfortingly toasty near him. She was chilled in spite of the hot weather and decided not to move away as that would only make it conspicuous. He did not seem too bothered by her closeness. Perhaps he was asleep already. She fell asleep strangely contented.

Unable to move away, Armaan suffered a sudden, burning desire to turn around and take her into his arms. The thought of how she had curled into his arms when he had held her remained etched on his mind. He had almost kissed her! What madness had gripped him? He had forgotten everything that that had brought them together. The complications would be disastrous. Zara shifted closer as if trying to warm herself. God! He was craving to turn and wrap her in his arms ... just this once! But he remained stubbornly still, grimly determined not to let the soft body pressed into his back cause anymore damage to his resolution. He waited until the desire passed and finally closed his eyes.

Everything went into a tailspin a week later when Vini dropped the bombshell after dinner while everyone was relaxing with dessert. With the serene air of someone who had just visited a shrine, she said to Armaan, "Since you seemed to have forgotten to take your wife for a honeymoon, I took the liberty of booking the tickets for a week in Goa. I can make arrangements for tickets to Switzerland or Indonesia as well. You can choose any destination you like. You know how

difficult it is to get five-star service so Mr. Suri is doing the needful. He was very happy to oblige since we have been doing very good business at their boutique at the hotel.”

Armaan was furious. “You can cancel! Mom, you should have asked me first!”

“Why? So you can refuse? Don’t you think you should take some time off? I am sure Zara needs a break!”

“NO!” Both Armaan and Zara said in unison. Well at least they agreed on something, thought Zara with a dreadful feeling.

“Mom I just took a week off for the wedding!” Zara was ready to beg on her knees if she had to. She was clutching at straws here. A week alone with Armaan would probably see her grow horns and talons! Of course, she could take another week off. But she couldn’t admit that.

“Nonsense! You are hardly spending time with each other. It is final. You are going for the honeymoon this weekend.”

The children grew excited. “Can we go too?” they chorused together.

“No! Only married people go for a honeymoon! Children go to school!” Aparna said sternly, “Happy honeymoon bro!” With a wide grin she whispered into his ear conspiratorially, “Don’t forget to wear your armour. It shields from sharp objects!”

Even amidst the chatter of children and elaborate explanations given by their grandmother, Zara heard the comment and felt a little hurt. She rose from the table mustering up her usual cloak of dignified resilience and excused herself.

Upstairs in the bedroom she paced the floor in suppressed fury. How dare they treat her like that! Some of the old hurt resurfaced but she shook herself free of maudlin self-pity. Nothing had changed between her and *the other three*. They had grown up despising her for who she was. She was still the outsider. Soon ... she would be gone! And she would make sure she never saw any of them again!

Armaan strode in with his customary black frown. “Did you say something to her about wanting a honeymoon? Why was she harping on about *you* wanting a break?”

Zara wished he would choke on his presumptuous, arrogant tongue! “You think I would want to go with you even if the gods offered me free tickets to paradise?”

“And you think I would go anywhere with you if you were the last woman on earth? I guess there is no choice but to do what she bids. It is after a long time that I have seen her healthy and happy. However much I may loathe this situation I cannot refuse her!” He ran a restless hand through his hair and paced furiously.

Zara rolled her eyes in frustration, “At this rate she would be ordering us to have babies at a prescribed date!”

Armaan swiveled on his heels to say mockingly, “God forbid! Can’t imagine having kids with those familiar prickly pear traits!”

Zara could have lunged at him for that not-so-subtle comment on her nature, but she settled for saccharine sweetness, “Oh how lovely that you finally admit to *your* flaws. Of course your kids would inherit your praiseworthy genes rather than the fine characteristics of the poor unfortunate woman that you decide to bed, to beget them.”

“And the man who marries you must certainly have the talent and the dexterity of a consummate fencing enthusiast. A lesser man would wilt without suitable armour to protect himself from your acidic tongue!”

She held herself straight and looked into his eyes, “Like the way you would wilt if you didn’t wear the armour that Aparna so kindly suggested you do, to protect yourself from me?”

So she had heard the comment. He should have stopped Aparna, Armaan thought regretfully. Whatever the relationship between him and his wife, no one had the right to butt in and pass comments. It had never been his intention to hurt Zara even though they had so much animosity between them. He had planned to keep it simple by not getting involved. He had never expected to feel ... this strange attraction whenever she was around. It made him angry! Out of control! All his plans were being skewered by so many external and internal factors that he wasn’t in control anymore. Aparna’s silly jibe had been in bad taste, but for the life of him he could not bring himself to apologize to Zara. In a way it was beginning to sound true

to him. That he needed armour to protect himself from Zara. Dammit! He was not supposed to feel this way!

He walked into the bathroom and called out in a hard tone. “Let us get this damned honeymoon over with. It is beginning to feel like a curse!”

“My sentiments exactly!” Zara called out as he shut the door of the bathroom with a bang. She sat heavily on the bed. It was time to play another farce.

The clash of wills between mother and son continued on how long the honeymoon should last. Vini was adamant about a week while Armaan stuck mulishly to a measly two days including departure and arrival.

The choice of destination was also a bone of contention but Zara put her foot down saying that she could not leave the country for a vacation as she had a ton of pending work at the office. Armaan agreed firmly on that decision with her. So they grudgingly agreed on Goa for a week. The only people excited about the honeymoon were the kids and they were not even going!

The flight to Goa was pleasantly uneventful. They refused to acknowledge each other's presence even though they sat together. The unspoken rule was to maintain distance and dignity without indulging in a volley of acrimonious words between them. Throughout the flight and the hour-long cab journey to the hotel Armaan held himself aloof except for a word here and there when conversation became necessary. Away from the prying eyes of family members, they did not have to pretend to be in the throes of marital joy.

Zara's mother-in-law had talked herself to a standstill with the list of instructions. Armaan had finally put a stop to the harangue with a sigh of exasperation, firmly telling his mother that he had already been to Goa several times and was not a wide-eyed tourist!

They reached the hotel in the afternoon and were led into the lounge by a uniformed bellhop. Every nook of the reception was lavishly designed; the beautiful cottages were eco-friendly, ensconced within a cluster of palms with a tiny private garden that gave it an exotic look. The view from the luxurious living room with its wide

glass windows was spectacular, the afternoon sun glinting on the cerulean Arabian Sea.

“What in the world is this?”

Zara was astonished to see the room covered in floral decorations, scented candles and glittering streamers festooned the bed from the ceiling to the floor.

Armaan followed her into the room with the room service staff and looked askance at the red and gold motif of the honeymoon suite which his mother had arranged to be decorated. “Great! More flowers!” said Armaan with a fatal air.

The staff wished Zara and Armaan, gushing effusive compliments. After he was gone, bowing and scraping obsequiously, Zara blurted out, “We don’t want this cottage!”

For the next few minutes, a long argument ensued which didn’t favour either of them. “So you are welcome to sleep on the seashore if you want! The natural surroundings are ideal to calm even a lunatic.” Armaan’s curt words infuriated her as he continued. “If Mom hears from Mr. Suri that we wanted separate bedrooms, it would be hell! I don’t want her getting concerned.”

That seemed to have the desired effect. Her mother-in-law should not come to know of the real situation at any cost. Zara shrugged, “You can take the divan in the drawing room for the night. We don’t have to pretend married bliss here.”

“Yes, of course, you are right!” drawled Armaan with a smirk. “But you will be the one taking the divan. It is too short for my height!”

“Fine! How silly of me to expect chivalry from you!” said Zara imperiously and began to unpack her suitcase.

They ordered a late lunch pretending not to notice each other. Afterwards Zara retired into a corner of the drawing room with her laptop.

After a while, Armaan left mentioning that he would be back in an hour. When even after two hours he didn’t reappear Zara began to grow restless. How insensitive of him that he should dump her in the hotel room and disappear!

Unable to concentrate on anything, she gazed out of the clear

window. At the horizon were large dark clouds indicating light showers. On an impulse, she threw aside her calculator and notepad and called the reception for a hired taxi. There were cars on rent for the guests and she thought that it was a splendid idea. She did not want her war with Armaan to spoil her vacation. A week alone in this place would be divine, she thought delightedly.

Quickly changing into a loose sunny yellow top and jeans, she braided her hair and put on her shoes. As the mood for exploration and adventure took over, she felt better. She called Armaan, but there was no answer. So she left a message to be delivered to her husband that she would be back for dinner.

As she turned out of the driveway, Zara felt the first stirrings of a vagabond who had sprouted wings. Half an hour went by, the road widened into a fork and she drove without heeding the signboards, navigating through the turns and twists, simply enjoying the drive. She did not notice that while enjoying the scenic beauty she had forgotten to keep track of the road. Very soon, there were green mountains everywhere. After a while she felt that it was best if she stopped for directions.

But there was no visible human habitation anywhere. She remembered seeing red roofed houses a little way back where a few children were playing. A signboard written in Konkani whizzed past. A little worried now that it was quickly growing dark, she tried to turn the car around on the narrow muddy lane she had come through.

The first fat drop of rain brought a fresh bout of fears. Within minutes, the entire place was misty with rain. It fell in swathes, heavier and darker, while the road ahead grew slushier. Suddenly there was a deluge of water all around the car. She braked hard, sensing the strong pull of the currents on the wheels. Fear gripped her. She stopped for a moment until the water on the road receded. It was a mistake. The water came up to the wheels and submerged them. She started the car in a panic and it gurgled with a sad noise.

Zara was truly frightened now. She tried to call Armaan but there was no signal.

She decided to walk hoping to find her way. She opened the car

door and was soaked in muddy water up to her knees and drenched from the top by the swirling rain. As she stood frightened to her bones, she heard the sound of someone sloshing through the water towards her. A figure loomed large in front of her and she almost screamed in terror.

“Zara!”

It was Armaan! Oh, thank God for making him find her! She hurled herself into his arms like the proverbial damsel in distress and he caught her tight against his chest.

Armaan had only one thing on his mind. Fear! He gathered her closer in his embrace in sheer relief and a mixture of nameless emotions he couldn't recognize or acknowledge. He had been terrified that Zara was lying somewhere injured or worse. He didn't want to think of the agony he had felt when he found that she had left the hotel. Unable to stand the undercurrent of tension between them, he had gone to meet an old artist friend from his college days. When he returned, Zara was gone. After waiting for half an hour with only the message left at the hotel reception, he had grown worried. When she didn't answer his calls he had turned the hotel and its staff upside down, grilling them about her whereabouts. Searching for her in the pouring rain under a darkening sky, he was beginning to lose his mind when he saw her huddled in the cold rain near the car. The apprehension that he had felt for the past few hours exploded without warning.

“You imbecile! What the hell were you thinking? You just drove off without knowing the terrain!” He gripped her shoulders, looking down at her with blazing eyes.

Zara had forgotten everything at being held in that tight clasp. She had been on the verge of tears. Oh to be safe in his arms! But then how could anything be that good. Any words of gratitude that had risen to her lips simply burnt to cinders in the flames of temper. All she had wanted was a little comfort but it was useless to expect anything from Armaan.

“What was I supposed to do? Should I wait for you, like an obedient wife while you disappeared without a trace for hours? I am

not answerable to you!” she threw back huffily.

Armaan held up his hands in exasperation. It had been such a relief to see her a few minutes ago, safe and unharmed. He couldn't resist gathering her close to him when he saw her look unsure and afraid. And she was yelling at him when it was all her fault!

Angry at his own foolishness, he let go of her immediately, aware that he had revealed too much of his emotions. “You have the entire hotel staff searching for you right now! Couldn't you call and tell me that you had plans?”

“I informed the front desk receptionist! How would I know that the car would break down in this rain? There was no signal on the phone,” Zara was shrieking now. She rued the day she decided to marry this arrogant man.

“What do you mean the car's broken down?” Opening the door, he peered inside the gloomy darkness. He tried the ignition key several times but the engine was not even gurgling anymore. He slammed the door shut and glowered at her. “I am not surprised that it has broken down! Half an hour with you and anything would break down!”

“Shut up!” She took a step in the swirling water and lost her balance. He was quick to steady her.

“No, you shut up and listen.” Armaan struggled to keep his voice calm. “We will have to walk back. We'd be lucky if we find our way out in this rain. I didn't get a vehicle because I took a walk around the hotel area. I didn't think you would have come this far. When I couldn't find you in the vicinity of the hotel, I took a lift from a passerby. We asked some people on the way and the man dropped me about a kilometer from here. I have been walking all the way from the last sign board!”

“Alright what do we do now?” she asked a little sheepishly.

“We walk until we find the road back to the hotel.” He flicked back the wet hair plastered on his head and began walking while trying to call the hotel. There was no signal.

Zara was late in reacting, almost falling into the muddy waters as she tried to keep up with his swift strides. Very soon, she was falling behind and could only make out his outline in the dark. She wiped

the water from her eyes and plodded on, stumbling once or twice. One moment he was there and then, he was gone.

“Armaan!” she yelled in fright trying to wade through the water.

He appeared out of nowhere and scared her again. “Why can’t you move faster?” He didn’t want to be stranded in this godforsaken place with his wife. He had to get her out safely!

Zara thought she would lose her tattered self-control if he shouted at her again. “Not everyone has long legs like you!”

“What ... now you want circus stilts to walk on? It is just a little water!” he drawled impatiently. He gripped her arm to frog march her down the invisible path.

Sorely tempted to knock him on his head, Zara decided to swallow her pride. She could barely see anything and wondered how he could navigate with such precision. They walked for several minutes when unexpectedly Armaan stopped, pulling her back before she could hurtle along blindly. He pointed out the large fallen tree and some loose rocks blocking their path.

Zara looked at him in trepidation.

“It wasn’t there earlier. The only way out seems to fly over it.” Armaan said with a grimace. He clasped her hand but Zara shook herself free to examine the tree.

“There has to be a way around it!” She was going to burst into hopeless tears any moment.

She sloshed through the water in the darkness. Before Armaan could stop her she tried to step over the tree’s thick branches. Suddenly her foot seemed to sink into the mud and she was tottering backwards into dark empty space. Her scream rent the air as she fell into the valley below. Her flailing hand was at once caught in a manacled grip. She hung on but only for a few seconds as Armaan, who loomed over the edge trying to haul her back, could not keep his own footing in the loose mud.

They fell headlong, sliding with the torrent. Zara was crushed between Armaan’s heavier body and the soft slippery earth. Trying to protect her, Armaan cradled her head in the crook of his shoulder, holding her tight against him. He was afraid that his weight would

crush her. There was no time to think as they rolled and rolled through thick grassy foliage without any impediments to their downward tumbling. They landed in, what appeared in the dark, a meadow with high grass thick with the stench of cow dung and slick mud.

Shocked by the fall, they lay panting for a while. Zara could feel every limb and muscle rattled by the fall. She realized that she was sprawled on top of him. She touched his cheek worriedly, fearing that he was knocked senseless trying to save her.

Armaan stirred, breathing heavily and looked directly at her. "Are you alright? No bones broken?" he asked in a gruff voice.

Zara felt immensely relieved, grateful that he had protected her even though the fall.

"I think I managed without getting killed. Thank you! A bit shaken though," she whispered, still groggy.

"Well, then get off me or I will shake you up myself for almost getting *me* killed!" he yelled right into her ear. Zara scrambled up as fast as she could, her ears ringing with the yell.

Armaan rose, wiping his hands on his shirt with a black grimace.

What was wrong with the man? He was permanently grouchy! A blistering tirade rose to her lips which she quelled with much difficulty. She breathed in deeply to get a grip on it. "It was an accident!"

"Indeed it was! If you had not gone hopping around the tree we would still have been standing on the road! Now we are standing in a puddle of dung and God knows what else, in the middle of a ..." he looked around in the gloom and continued his tirade, "a paddock without an address!"

"No one asked you to be a superhero to save me!" she pointed out acidly, any gratitude extinguished by his words.

"You are darned right! I should have let you have your merry roll in this dung alone," he raged, trying to get the slick mud off his hair.

Enraged she picked up a lump of some indistinct substance she saw nearby and threw it at him with a splat. "Take that, you grump! I have had enough of you!"

A growl of sheer outrage emanated from his throat, as her aim found its mark. Too angry to think about his actions he scooped up a handful of the same goopy material and deposited it with relish on her head. She shrieked and hopped in utter disgust. She lunged at him with her bare hands aimed at his throat. Armaan held her back with ease, evading the grip. A dexterous twist and he had maneuvered her into his arms, his grip tight enough to squeeze the breath out of her. Zara was panting as her eyes threw daggers into his dark shadowed face.

“Enough!” Armaan growled, his eyes turning flinty. “... or I shall not be responsible for my actions.”

They glared, not wanting to give in to the other, locked in a battle of wills, unwilling to be cowed down by the other. Armaan was the first to become aware of a sizzle of reaction. She was crushed into his chest down to the thighs. Tension sizzled between them as he became aware of every breath she took. He watched her through hooded eyes and saw the same intense awareness reflected in her face in a flash of lightning. Her breasts were flattened against the solid wall of his chest. He did not let go immediately and she did not move, not even daring to breathe now. After a moment, Armaan loosened the grip and they let go of each other as if scalded.

That couldn't have happened. Zara analyzed it and shut it away instantly. Armaan couldn't have looked at her in that way. Like he wanted to ... No! In a flash, she remembered the day she had tightened the tie on his neck. It was as if he wanted to do more than just hold her. The darkness was playing tricks on her mind. It was impossible to imagine Armaan attracted to her. No. It had to be this insane moment. Of course, both of them had gone shamefully beyond the boundaries of civilized behaviour. She had never thought that she would stoop to physically attacking anyone. Clearly Armaan brought out the worst in her.

Zara looked at him as he vigorously removed the dirt splattered all over and gave a sugar-coated smile. He glowered at her temerity, wondering how long he could remain patient with her.

“At least we are out of the flooded area!” Zara said looking around.

Armaan followed her gaze and found that she was right.

“Great to hear that good news! Now we don’t know where we have to go - left or right! On the road, I had some idea about the direction and knew we had a chance to reach the hotel.” Armaan stood looking around with his hands on his hips.

The wind picked up even as they considered useless options one after another. A flash of lightning across the landscape lit up barbed wire fencing. They walked towards the edge and after much distress found a gap to squeeze through. To their surprise, they were on a small dirt track. They walked for a few minutes to find a small house. However, they were dismayed to find that the hotel was too far out for them to walk in this weather. On enquiring about a place to stay, the residents informed them about a lodge a kilometer straight down the path.

They walked with grim determination, sometimes erupting into a squabble and subsiding again into a sullen silence. The rain and wind intensified and their trek became slower with no lodge in sight. There seemed to be a power failure everywhere. Armaan tried calling the hotel several times but there was still no signal.

“Are you sure you heard the man right? This path does not seem to be leading anywhere! We have passed two private bungalows and a shanty!” Zara asked for the third time in confusion.

“If you keep quiet more often, I might just be able to hear the instructions correctly. The man we met at the last turning couldn’t get a word in edgeways with you badgering him with questions!” She ignored the sarcasm. The trees on the side of the road were thick and they did not see any signboards as per the directions given to them earlier.

“Did we take the wrong turn at the fork?” she questioned again.

“No we didn’t! The man specifically said ‘turn left’,” Armaan said grimly.

“But we didn’t turn left because it was covered in shrubs!” she persisted.

“Can you just leave this to me?” he thundered in exasperation. They walked a few meters and reached the edge of a cliff.

Armaan looked down and sighed. The silence was loaded with meaning as Zara shot a snide look his way. He turned with his palms up to stall a mutinous 'I told you so' expression on Zara's face. "If you say one more word I will be tempted to tip you over the edge."

Zara raised her eyebrows contemptuously. "Yeah, sure! And I will make sure that I take you down with me again! Now can we go back to the turning we missed?" She began to stalk back the way they had come.

They trudged along for another half an hour before they saw a gate. It was a sprawling Portuguese style bungalow but without a ray of light in the windows. They walked up to the gates to peer at the nameplate that claimed that it was indeed a lodge.

"It looks haunted to me!" Zara could barely stand with exhaustion.

He snorted in derision, "Don't worry, one look at you and they'll know who's scarier. You could frighten the hell out of any ghost!"

Not to be left behind in the verbal battle she purred with malicious sweetness, "You aren't looking like a prince drenched in musk either, you know!"

He scowled down at her, resisting the urge to say something more when a movement at the window caught his eye. Someone was moving about with a lamp. Armaan went in, followed by Zara and they were soon standing in front of a wooden door with a brass knocker. It was after the third knock that the door was finally opened by an old man carrying the lamp they had seen earlier.

"I am Elbert Vaz. There has been no electricity since the rains began. How can I help you?"

Armaan explained their predicament and the old man nodded, leading the way into a giant hallway that ended at the base of a beautiful winding staircase.

"It is a very old house. My great-grandfather built it several decades back. Since my sons don't live here anymore, and it needed maintenance, my wife and I decided to turn it into a lodge."

A tiny old woman almost as thin as her husband came out from the kitchen.

"Elvira can get what you want to eat. I am afraid there is nothing

elaborate to offer. Normally, tourists call in advance if they want to stay for a few days.”

Armaan nodded his agreement and they proceeded into the courtyard at the back of the house.

“Only one bedroom is clean. The rest were occupied until today and we couldn’t clear it up since the storm began. I am afraid the amenities are quite simple.”

Zara was grateful that the beds were clean.

“You can clean up the mud in the courtyard, at the well. Later you can bathe in the bathroom upstairs but the water in the taps would be cold,” said Elbert

They stood near the well, washing themselves as best as they could by pouring bucket after bucket of freezing water. Zara stood shivering, drenched from head to toe when Elbert came again to call them for dinner.

Elbert offered his own clothes when he brought in towels and blankets for them. But Zara and Armaan refused immediately, knowing that they would never fit either of them, the old people being too tiny even to contemplate such a prospect.

Armaan saw Zara shiver again. She had crossed her arms across her chest, rubbing her palms together, trying to warm herself. Water dripped from her hair and gleamed on the smooth skin on her cheek and her throat. Her voluminous top stuck to her wet body. She was walking about the room looking at old photos on the wall. He was still figuring out a way to block out the memory of what he had felt when she had fallen on top of him. Later when he had pulled her into his arms ... everything had gone crazy! In one evening he had experienced a range of emotions that had simply gone into overload. It was just not like him to react in this uncontrolled way with a woman and he had done everything wrong from the beginning. Why had he not been in control?

Zara was saying something to Elbert about wanting a little detergent to wash her clothes. He dragged himself back to reality and requested for the food to be served in the room when he saw Zara tremble again.

They trudged upstairs to find the room lit with candles and a lantern that cast long golden beams everywhere. Armaan exclaimed on finding a charcoal brazier in the cavity of a defunct fireplace, "At least this will keep us warm until we change."

Elbert left them a packet with an assortment of some more candles and matches, a packet of detergent, soap, shampoo, toothpaste and several sheets, blankets and towels. To Zara's surprise and delight, there were rubber slippers for both of them.

Zara averted her eyes when Armaan peeled away his wet shirt and squelching shoes to hunch down in front of the brazier. A palm-sized bruise on his shoulder caught her eye.

"You're hurt!" She flew to his side and knelt in front of him. "Let me call Elbert for some ointment."

Armaan was stranded on uncertain ground by the look of genuine concern in her beautiful eyes. She touched his shoulder gingerly to test the injury and he jerked away. "It's just a bruise. I will be fine." He could never tell her that in the chaotic state of mind he was in, he might just pounce on her.

Zara stood up in a huff. "Suit yourself!" He must have injured himself when they had rolled down the hillock.

She hid her worry by pottering around the room for a while. Then she went down in search of Elbert who gave her an antiseptic ointment. Quietly she kept it near Armaan who remained silent. She was about to turn away when he mumbled a gruff 'thank you'.

Zara sighed, relieved that he did not argue this time. She took off her shoes, sneaking glances at his broad back. She didn't want to feel this way about him. But then, she acknowledged, painfully aware of the heavy thudding in her chest, that she had always felt this way about him. How comfortable he looked without the shirt and here she was jittery about taking off her wet top. Her toes curled into the furry carpet in reaction.

The meal arrived before they could bathe. They were too hungry to wait so they decided to eat. They sat on wooden stools wrapped in blankets with a table in the centre laden with the hot food in old silverware. The meal consisted of steaming spice-scented rice, chicken

curry, sandwiches, lentils and vegetables. A bowl of fresh fruits and roasted nuts followed much to their satisfaction.

“Now, we can sleep in peace,” Zara said tiredly, picking up the items she needed to make her way to the bathroom. Unfortunately, she bumped into Armaan who had the same intentions. They were stuck in the middle of the doorway glowering at each other.

“Ladies first!” said Zara imperiously trying to edge her way in.

“The times have changed, honey!” Armaan drawled in a silky tone. “Gentlemen have an equal right to the bathroom at whatever times they choose!”

“Ha! You will be hammered with every piece of antique furniture in this room,” she threw back angrily. “You did the same thing to me when we were at the hotel. You took the bed and I let go, opting for the divan! It is time to repay my kindness.”

“But we didn’t sleep at the hotel. You lost your way and we landed up here instead!” Armaan replied, leaning further into the door, his arm brushing her shoulder.

She leaned away as much as she could to avoid touching him. “Armaan ...” Her impatience fizzled out suddenly. She was bereft of words when his melting brown gaze slid to the opening of her wet shirt, to the hint of voluptuous curves. She thought she would disintegrate, pinned under that open male gaze.

Armaan was slowly coming to the conclusion that he had lost his mind. He had just caught himself assessing his wife’s lovely assets. It must be the lousy weather, he thought in despair. Just not suited to an unwanted honeymoon. Angry with himself, he raised his eyes to her face. Her lips were so full of promise that he was distracted from what he intended to do. What had he intended to do? Oh ... yes ... wrestle the rights for bathroom visitation from his shrewish wife! He must remind himself diligently of that aspect of his wife’s nature whenever temptation surfaced. He looked at her again. Her eyes, though steely now, were shadowed with fatigue. Zara was exhausted and he was a fool arguing over such a silly thing ... er ... what was it ... Ah yes the bathroom. Then, as if it did not matter, Armaan stepped back letting her hurry in.

She trembled in aftershock as she shut the door quickly!

Why had he looked at her like that? It had astounded her into complete silence a few moments ago, giving her that toe-curling need to throw herself into his arms. She looked into the mirror at her wet image in disillusionment. Did he think she was fat? She was behaving like a typical love-struck teenager! Her fist pressed into her chest to quell the feeling of deep-seated insecurity. Anger took its place. It was better than feeling insecure. But another thought dislodged the anger again. Why had he stepped back? She knew that Armaan was just as tired as she was. He had protected her throughout the rough trek even when he was so annoyed with her. Zara had not called out her gratitude though she knew she should have. She had forgotten all about who should get the bathroom when he had looked at her in that way.

Zara shook herself out of the bizarre mood and got down to washing and rinsing her muddy clothes in the cold tap water. It was a good half an hour before she stepped out, wrapped respectably in the extra sheets.

Cleverly covered in sheets Zara could have been a nun, thought Armaan disappointed. He was going to make some changes in their living arrangements after this honeymoon was over, he thought sternly. He was going to have a firm chat with his mother about shifting their residence. He strode into the bathroom to shut the door firmly, wishing fervently that he could shut his wife out of his mind just the same way.

Zara set about drying her dripping garments on an antique wooden clothes stand in the far corner of the room. It was good that the room was warm. The clothes would be dry by morning. Elbert had promised a steam press for the next day apologizing for not having bath robes. Until then they would have to make do with the sheets.

Zara looked at herself in the old-fashioned mirror and sighed. If there was any embarrassment as she had emerged from the bathroom, it was lost now. Armaan had taken one look at her and left without a word. Given his superior sense of style and aesthetics, he would probably be giving her tips on how to look elegant in a bed sheet.

The wind howled, taking her mind away from the turmoil. It whistled through the slats in the old wooden window shaking the bolts and hinges wildly. She opened the window for some fresh air. The wind took charge of everything. She reeled back from the impact of the cold, wet lashing, as it filled the curtains and blew them about wildly. In the ensuing chaos, an old vase kept on the table crashed to the floor. Zara scrambled about to close the flapping windows when her sheet slithered to her waist billowing about like a parachute. A giggle of pure delight escaped her as the gusts of wind swirled her damp hair, giving her goose bumps all over. In vain, she tried to retrieve her temporary dress and close the windows at the same time.

Hearing the crash, Armaan swung the bathroom door open ... and the next moment, his world tilted upside down. For those few seconds, he thought he had seen a vision of incomparable beauty. It was surreal and inexplicable. He stared and stared at the sight in front of him without being able to move an inch. In the flickering light of the candles, the wind played havoc with the things in the room from where a window had burst open. Amidst the clatter, in the centre of the chaos, stood Zara, her long silken hair blowing about her face and bare shoulders. She was struggling with the windows as they flapped and danced about in abandon to the wind's commands. The bed sheet had slithered half way down her torso and was hitched precariously around her hips while she grabbed a handful of the swirling linen to cover herself up and close the window at the same time.

She was stunningly beautiful! Her skin gleamed, gilded in the lamplight, softened by the shadows. Her figure, silhouetted against the inky black night outside the window, lit up by sporadic lightning, was generously endowed. To his fevered imagination, she appeared to have stepped out of a Raja Ravi Varma painting or a baroque mural and he stared without blinking, noting the dips and opulent curves of her heavy breasts, the small rounded belly and the tempting swell of her hips still covered in the sheet. What was more mesmerizing was her gay laughter that she stifled immediately while resuming her attempts at restoring order. It was the first time that he had heard her laugh. A sound of untrammelled joy that touched him deeply. In that

pure moment of madness she was a creature of nature, one with the elements ... unattainable ...

Then Zara turned with half a smile on her full lips at her precarious predicament and saw Armaan. The impact of his gaze froze her. Her eyes widened and her face turned blood red in sheer mortification. Clutching the elusive sheets as quickly as possible, she spun away from him with her back rigid as steel.

Stirring out of the shocked, mindless state, Armaan strode forward to close the window. Turning towards her, he saw that Zara was already covered from shoulder down and was furtively tightening the knots to avoid any chances of a repeat. Without a word, for he could not speak one meaningful syllable to her even if he strived hard, he picked up his phone and rang up the hotel. At least the signal seemed fine this time. Even as he was talking to the manager he couldn't get the exquisite image of Zara out of his mind.

Zara wanted to crawl into a deep dark hole until the next century! She trembled in a mixed reaction of sensual awareness and shame. Why had she not heard him come out in time? Oh, the shame! He seemed so calm, just turning away without saying a word. He had come out of the bath with only a sheet wrapped around his lean hips like a sarong, emphasizing the narrow waist and tight flat abdomen. He looked most comfortable in his skin. His smooth muscled back gleamed with droplets of water as he talked on the phone. His hair fell in curly waves on his forehead making her want to run a hand through its thick darkness. She shivered again in reaction, her eyes drawn to the powerful thighs.

Zara wished she could brush the incident aside with the same nonchalance that Armaan had shown. There he was, talking as if everything was perfectly all right, while she felt frumpy and was turning maroon with embarrassment. Perhaps it was because he was used to seeing the female body while he drew them on canvas. It may not have mattered to him, and yes, she wasn't the kind of woman he would find beautiful. Zara grew angrier at the turn of thoughts reminding her of Bani's comment that she could never be woman enough to keep him by her side.

Armaan cut the call and said in clipped tones, "The hotel staff says there is a short cut. If we had reached here on time, they could have sent us a taxi! It is no use saying that now! We might as well get some sleep and leave tomorrow morning." He began to hang his washed clothes for drying on the clothes stand and placed it in front of the charcoal brazier.

The little piece of information combined with her earlier angry mood, upset Zara even more. They had gone through needless trouble when they could have reached the hotel easily. "If you had not taken a wrong turn we could have reached the hotel for the night instead of getting stranded here!" Zara pointed out.

"We are stuck in this place because of you!" he said with a shrug.

So the blame game began. "To think that for the next six months I have to tolerate this every single day! It is unthinkable!" She sat down on a stool stiff with frustration and began to brush her hair with her fingers.

"Yes it *is* unthinkable that I have to bear with your ill-tempered, uncompromising attitude for such a long time. All you have done is belittle me, since the day I decided to marry you, just so that you could get even with me at all costs."

"What are you talking about?" She stood in front of him with her hands on her hips.

"You deliberately insulted me with that hideous thing you wore for our engagement. It looked like a giant, shiny orange pumpkin! Everyone was sniggering! You seem to derive pleasure in making a fool of me. If I had not appointed Aparna to take care of your trousseau you would probably have worn a table cloth to the wedding!"

The accusation stumped her into silence but not for too long. "How dare you say such a horrible thing?" She was panting with the effort of putting a lid on her temper. "You don't know anything about me! I *don't* enjoy hurting others! Unlike your obsession for trivial things like stylish dressing, I have better things to think about! It is no wonder that you have turned out the way you have! I cannot imagine spending the rest of my life with a man who is so fickle! I would

rather marry a man who accepts me as I am, whether I am wearing a tablecloth, or a bobbinet, or a ... loofah!"

Zara was blurting out words without thinking. She jabbed a finger at his chest and stepped in closer. "Some of us less 'privileged' people have different and serious priorities. All you do is run each other down because so-and-so is not wearing a designer outfit or not flaunting a sinfully exorbitant bag, cut out of a dead animal, the cost of which could feed a starving population. It's called entertainment when someone is seen flashing a million-dollar surgically enhanced pair of assets!" She took a deep breath and continued, "I am not surprised that you don't want commitment in marriage! You are too shallow to think of any woman with respect or real love! No woman worth her salt would ever genuinely want to stay married to a mulish, boor like you!"

Armaan knew then what white-hot fury meant. His hands balled into fists as his voice lowered into a growl, "Well, it's a surprise that *you* managed to land a husband at all! If I am not worthy of being a husband then *you* are not perfect wife material either! Your bitter waspish tongue can burn down a man's home! You are a vengeful, spiteful shrew! In fact, had your mother been alive she would have been very hurt to see you like this! It is a blessing that she is not present to rue this day."

The silence that followed that statement was an explosion. The moment the last words left his errant tongue, Armaan knew that he had gone too far.

Zara went deathly pale. It would have killed her to admit that his acid comment had gashed deep into old wounds. But she was too enraged to take it lying down.

Without a second thought, or remorse, her hand shot out and slapped hard across his face.

5

There was an excruciating silence when only the sound of the thunder outside was heard. Zara saw Armaan's face harden into a mask of unmitigated rage as his lips thinned into a deadly slash.

The growing red weal on his cheek did nothing to ease the agonizing wound in Zara's heart caused by his thoughtless, cruel words.

A fury he could not control any longer broke loose. Armaan grabbed her shoulders and backed her against the wall. For long moments he held her tight against his body, feeling the blood thrum through his veins at her close proximity. Their eyes locked in challenge. Then his mouth was crushing her lips to submission in every possible way. Every inch of that hard unyielding body welded against her squirming one, extracting sweet revenge. She gasped when he nipped her bottom lip none too gently ... just stopping short of causing harm.

A vicious blow caught his shin and Armaan growled in rage. The blow didn't have the effect that Zara was hoping for. It only resulted in stoking the leashed aggression as Armaan kissed her again.

The fury that she felt was volcanic. Without thinking of the repercussions, Zara was kissing him back, finding it to be the best method of defense. Even as she turned into the aggressor, she realized the folly of her action when his hands curved around her hips to hold her closer to his arousal. She had no way of recovering from the shot of pleasure that slid through her veins. She was melting against him, against her will, with the kiss binding them together.

Armaan was astonished by the kiss. Zara had stopped pounding on his chest. He wished she hadn't! The kiss was far more effective in unsettling him than her violent reaction. Sheer pleasure hit him when

she sank her hands into his hair with her arms around his neck. Zara couldn't stop kissing him once the floodgates had opened, slaking a deep thirst that seemed endless. Armaan finally took charge, twisting her around and tumbled with her on the bed. He landed effortlessly on top of her, enveloping her in his arms.

Zara was immobile from head to toe. Jolted out of her bubble of excitement, she could not fathom what had suddenly changed between them. His tall muscled body connected with her from chest to thigh. What had she done! Kissing him like it was a lifeline for her! She couldn't face him. Her eyes squeezed shut, terrified that Armaan would see the hot desire in them. One look would be enough to elicit a mocking comment. Her heart pounded like a crazy drum. She wanted to cry out, scream at him that she ... wanted him desperately! No! She wanted to escape this torture! She was tangled with him, limbs, sheets and all, in such a manner that she could not move an inch. Both were motionless in silent awareness.

For Armaan, the effort of just holding on to his reeling senses was too great. The kiss had left him shaken. Zara's eyes were squeezed shut when he kissed her again hungrily. She moaned for the first time, wanting to wrap her arms around him, even as her eyes filled with tears.

The warm tears were worse than the slap he had received a few minutes ago. The droplets dripped through his fingers that were tangled in her hair, framing her face. He lifted his mouth off her reddened lips, suddenly contrite. Zara lay still, her breath coming in shallow gasps, her eyes still closed with tears flowing freely now.

"Zara? Sweetheart ... talk to me!" Armaan whispered, cupping her face, his voice bordering on a flimsy apology. His tone gentled for the first time since the senseless frenzy had begun. He smoothed her tangled hair away from her face.

Zara didn't know what to say. The gentle query and the very first endearment from Armaan broke her resolve not to cry. Her face crumpled without words in a soft sob. Zara felt the need to scream and scream, but she would not let herself have that relief yet. Not while he was watching her. Stoically she swallowed the next sob and

waited for him to get off her ... waited with eyes still closed.

Slowly, the sensations burned every resistance in her body. Her limbs grew heavy and languorous as they acknowledged the hard sinewy, muscles on her. She kept still, not wanting to give away how she felt.

A slow steady fire burned its way between her thighs where his muscled leg had fitted in. Patience, she told herself. Now that he did not seem so angry, he might just leave her. That would effectively douse the fire that was now licking all the way to her breasts, cushioned against his bare chest. Seconds ticked by, but he did not move. She knew he must be watching her, those dark brown eyes without mercy, his face only inches from hers.

If she opened her eyes now would he mock her again? Laugh at her vulnerability? She did not want him to see the hopeless desire in her eyes. So, she kept them tightly shut as the tears flowed.

Little did Zara know that Armaan was already roasting in the same fire. He wiped the warm tears with a feather light touch. Gently he lowered his mouth to kiss some of the salty droplets, afraid that he had injured her.

Zara opened her tear-drenched eyes and Armaan was lost. He watched her parted lips gulp in air. The tiny movement enhanced the quicksilver response that razed down his defenses against the woman in his arms. His wife! His body registered every breath she took and he felt the lush curves melt.

Without thinking, egged on by a raging need denied for too long, he pressed soft kisses on her mouth. All anger had dissipated long back. He couldn't curb the urge to explore the sweetness of her mouth. Encouraged by the soft sigh that escaped her lips his finger traced a line on her smooth throat.

Zara decided to let go of all sense and reason. She just gave up fighting all the powerful feelings that she had hidden away for so long. She wanted this more than anything right now. Her arms went around his shoulders, urging him on. His hand curved around a rounded breast and Zara let out a shuddering breath. Soon his hands were running over her fiercely, exulting in the glorious curves and the

feminine scent of her body. Her eyes glazed with a rush of desire she *didn't* want to control. She arched her back when he lifted her off the bed to hold her in a steely grip while he could press passionate, searing kisses from her throat and smooth shoulders to the hollow between her breasts.

Everything changed between them forever. The anger they had been battling was transformed into a greedy need to obliterate everything painful.

Armaan kissed her again with a wild passion that was escalating out of control. Zara was blown away by the ferocity of her desire. She was kissing him with all her heart, responding to every silken touch. When she saw his eyes dark and smouldering with hot desire she instinctively knew that hers were no different. He was soon pulling away the sheets from around them, touching and kissing her ravenously, everywhere, wherever he could find a sliver of satin skin.

What was unleashed could not be explained, or curbed as they hurled into a vortex of need. It goaded them, instigated them to ride the powerful wave.

There was no sense of discovery, no gentle foreplay, no loving words, nor sweet, passionate display of affection. Only a need to sate this wild hunger! Her last coherent thought was that he had not said a word about wanting her. But she could not say a word herself, for she was riding the same wave with him. Perhaps it was best that words did not hover between them in this moment of mindlessness.

Armaan was already pushing her thighs apart urgently with his knee before Zara could recover from the onslaught of his mouth on her navel. His teeth grazed her breasts in open-mouthed kisses. She clung to him, wanting only to appease some of the want that throbbed in her core as his hand dipped into the honeyed wetness. Zara moaned, willingly taking what he was offering her.

The world spun and whirled for Zara, as he settled between her legs. Their eyes met as if in mutual agreement to appease the insatiable hunger quickly. She captured his head in her palms looking up at him. Then he was thrusting into her for the first time. There was pain and she cried out. Her eyes flew up to his and Armaan knew that

he had entered her too quickly.

“Zara?” he whispered hoarsely, hovering over the edge, wanting a word of confirmation that she was fine. She reached up and kissed him, pulling him headlong over the brink with her unabashed display of passion. He tried to hold on, but she writhed for fulfillment. After that he couldn’t stop even if he wanted to, as he thrust again and again. She took a fragmented breath, her hips moving in unison against him. She didn’t want him to stop! The pain receded immediately and pure pleasure soared and melted her into him, as they became one. It surged and ripped through them and they were stumbling and flying again.

Zara wrapped herself instinctively around him as Armaan groaned her name in indescribable pleasure. Taking her face in his palms, Armaan kissed her lips gently once more. Somewhere in her foggy brain, a thought made a tiny indentation. She had truly become his wife. In a daze she heard Armaan groan her name again and again, tightening his grip to bury himself deep within her one last time, before falling on top of her in exhaustion.

It passed as quickly as a desert storm. For long moments Zara could only take deep shuddering breaths, utterly replete. She was floating on a cloud aimlessly. The pleasure that she had received had been too intense to be given a definition. How, when and why didn’t seem to have any meaning. She remained in a state of complete bliss in his arms for indefinite moments.

Then the pleasure receded and she fell out of the cocoon. The sudden impact of reality made her cringe. She had imagined it differently from this senseless copulation without genuine love and warmth between a man and a woman. The candles had guttered down and there was no light in the room, except an orange glow from the last one in the corner. They remained silent, except for their harsh breathing that brought them back to awareness.

Armaan was the first to rouse. He rolled off her and turned to the corner of the bed. The silence stretched between them, gathering in its wake a leaden grief for Zara. Armaan stared at the ceiling, his eyes vaguely noting the irregular patterns gouged into the old plaster

where several brown moths were settled for the night.

"It shouldn't have happened," he said quietly. Unaware that the statement had cut through Zara, he continued in a monotone, "I am sorry ... I didn't realize ... I couldn't stop myself on time." It sounded like a pathetic excuse even to his ears.

The silence stretched to tearing point, and then he heard her choked whisper. "I am equally responsible. I didn't know what came over me! It wasn't what I had imagined my first time to be like. But I guess I better learn to accept reality as it is."

That put a crunching halt to his thoughts. He had hurt her. He knew it now ... the emotional vulnerability that he had seen in her tears. And he couldn't do a thing to rectify that mistake. He was *not* going to find excuses for what had happened.

Like all stupid, arrogant males before him he had begun by trying to get even with her. Armaan could not believe that an educated, intellectually emancipated man like him could lash back at a woman by kissing her. It was pure madness! Yes, Zara had been wrong in striking him, but he had been cruel too in the insensitive words he had hurled at her.

There was no solace in the thought that Armaan had forgotten anger when Zara had kissed him back. He had never felt this way with another woman. Then the shock of the first teardrops had been like a cannonball crashing into his defenses. Anger had evaporated even as his mouth had touched hers. There had only been desire after that. What happened was too complicated for his tattered brain to analyze.

Yes, Zara had been just as wildly passionate as him. There had been no trace of hatred or anger in her eyes when she gave herself to him. But he could have stopped in time. She had been so soft and sensual in his arms that he had not been able to leash the undeniable need. This need to make love to her. Love? Where was the love in this? He didn't want to think of love. What had happened was only a result of rage and lust. It was useless now to pretend that he did not want her.

Armaan could not remember when it had first registered in his tightly reigned in mind. It had probably always been present ... this

strange tension that he had felt in her presence. Everything had come crashing down when he saw her wrapped in nothing but sheets. She was too gorgeous and he had lost his mind. Even now in the aftermath, he could have laughed heartily at himself for the blind fool he had been.

What had he said about her? That Zara was as large as a house ... and a block of ice? Zara was neither! That knowledge humbled him. He had been too confident about everything and it had washed away like a grandiose sandcastle under the onslaught of the first wave. Never in his wildest dreams could he have known that she could arouse such explosive passion in him. He had fallen off the edge and disintegrated into dust at the sight of her gleaming skin in the lamplight. It would have been much easier, if she had been dressed in those voluminous, ugly clothes that she preferred.

His mind seethed with unending disaster scenarios this episode might bring. Bunching up his fists, he dug them into his eyes to obliterate the images of their intertwined bodies from a few moments ago. The possibility of a pregnancy threw his head spinning like a top. It churned for a long while in his head as he drifted off to troubled sleep.

A long time passed before Zara could stir from her lonely corner. She wanted to escape. If only she could erase some of the pain that was mauling her from within. Armaan was asleep, still sprawled in the same position and she could barely make out his dark shape in the dwindling light.

Quietly she moved towards the narrow door of the balcony and crept out into the drippy night. The wooden stool in the corner was damp but she did not care. Huddled in the sheet, she gulped in the cold air in a sob that caught her unawares. When the tears fell she couldn't help herself. She covered her mouth lest anyone should hear her tortured voice.

Zara possessed the humility to acknowledge that it was a mistake. She had gone berserk! When he kissed her she had had no defense. Oh, how she had wanted it. She had kissed him back with such pleasure that all her principles had blown away. She also knew

instinctively that Armaan had been just as passionate as she had been. She should never have goaded him. Who can forgive a slap in the face? Everything that she believed in had been compromised in those few moments. Where was her self-control and dignity? Why hadn't she been able to hold on to her emotions?

Armaan only had to utter a tender endearment ... he had called her 'sweetheart' ... and then just a touch ... a hand wiping her tears ... and she had forgotten everything. She had swung like a pendulum from sheer rage to searing passion. And when he had tried to rein in at the peak of their lovemaking, she had urged him on, kissing him wildly, so that he wouldn't stop even for a moment.

It was *not* in anger that he had taken her. There was no love. But he would have stopped if she had. All those precious dreams that she had harbored in her heart, about love, passion and commitment had been shredded to pieces.

Zara sobbed into her hands, deep wracking sobs she thought only she could hear. Armaan turned in his sleep to find her gone. Startled, he rushed to the door only to see Zara wilted in a corner, crying as if her heart would break.

His instant reaction was to fling the door open, reach out to her, and apologize. He stopped short suddenly. This was a deeply private moment. He had always known her hard-as-nails personality.

Somehow, it seemed a sham all of a sudden. The woman sitting there with her head bent, every line in her body wailing utter defeat, was nowhere near the one Armaan was used to seeing. The spine of steel appeared fractured as she leaned dejectedly on the wall. In the grey light, her profile was fragile and etched with a grief that he could not understand.

Had he hurt her irreparably? He could not bear to see her like this. He preferred the feisty Zara. It felt strange to admit that he liked her the way she was. Spirited and strong-willed. A lesser woman might have wilted in his company. He remembered his mother's words. He was no model of virtue. Why had he never bothered to look beyond the hard exterior?

Armaan returned to bed with guilt digging into him. He would

have to make amends. Tomorrow he would apologize and make sure that he behaved better. He lay awake in bed for a long while, thinking of ways to make it up to her.

The tiny squeak of the door alerted him to her presence in the room. Zara slid in and lay without moving. Armaan was aching to take her into his arms and soothe her. But he couldn't break through the walls that divided them. A long while later he turned only to find her sound asleep.

With a gentle hand he touched her damp cheek, noticing the swollen eyes and the vulnerable tilt of her full lips that he had kissed so rashly.

Impulsively he gave in to the urge to gingerly tug her into his embrace. His arms wrapped around her, tucking her into his chest. She gave a shiver and he tightened his hold. "Zara ... are you cold?" he whispered into her ear, kissing her nape. There was no reply. She was too exhausted to stir from her sleep. It tugged at his heart ... this heart-breaking vulnerability. He wished he had been more sensitive. He would certainly make sure that his temper did not get the better of him. With several such tough resolutions, he dozed off, cuddling her close.

The next morning was clear and bright. Zara had been up with the chirping of the birds. The first thing she noticed was that she was cuddled into a solid muscled back, her arm encircling Armaan's waist, every inch of her feeling warm and cozy. The memories of the previous night emerged unbidden and she almost winced at the near physical pain. Extricating herself carefully from his warm embrace, she went in to bathe. When she returned, Armaan was at the ironing board with the pile of damp clothes that they had washed the night before.

Attired in the same way as her, he looked too good. She felt a rush of those unwanted thoughts that had driven her to madness last night and most of her young life. It felt hopeless, like crying for the moon. This morning everything seemed hopeless. Tears were beginning to prick her eyelids but she rammed them down. Try as she might, she could not rant and rave against him today. Nor could she throw

caustic remarks at him that would effectively deflect his attention away from her.

“The electricity has been restored. I have ironed your clothes. But your jeans are still damp at the waist. Hope they are in wearable condition. I could iron them once more if you want.” Armaan handed her a neatly folded stack of clothes.

“Thank you,” mumbled Zara under her breath, clutching the bundle to her chest, afraid her voice would crack if she said another word. Why was he being so nice suddenly? Did he really regret what happened last night? Her eyes welled up at the thought and she was caught unawares when a hand cupped her cheek gently.

“Your hair’s dripping,” said Armaan softly and stepped closer. Inane thing to say, he thought, but he did not know how to bridge the gap.

Her heart began to hammer at his nearness. Without thinking, she looked up to see the unusual warmth in his dark brown eyes.

His thumb caressed her cheek and Zara felt she would break down if she did not move away. Any other time, she would have slapped his hand away. But she couldn’t think of anything that would camouflage the intense surge of conflicting emotions. She could have borne with his contempt and derision, but not this gentle sweet touch!

“I am truly sorry about last night, Zara,” Armaan spoke, his breath fanning her cheek.

A wounded look came into her eyes and she immediately stepped away from him, lest she fall into his arms to savour more of that rare, melting, welcoming warmth. It was only regret for him and she knew she could not ask for more. “I am sorry too,” she said, inaudibly at first, and then cleared her throat to continue. “I shouldn’t have hit you. I said some terrible things too. I just couldn’t control my temper.”

There was a pause when Armaan thought about what to say next. This was *not* easy at all. There were too many issues that needed to be addressed, but Armaan could only think of how she looked with wet hair framing her face and trailing over sheet-covered breasts. It was rich dark satin he knew. Her silken skin looked flushed and inviting,

enough to make him want to take her to bed again.

The disastrous turn of thoughts caused a jam in his otherwise clear brain. She would probably murder him this time, he thought wryly. He had to go slow. Make Zara feel comfortable with him. He stopped short. He had forgotten that he had no intention of staying married to her for long!

He would have to alter his plans according to the new development in their relationship. He would apologize, be friends with her and they could part on amicable terms if all went well.

“What happened was too undignified. We needn’t be quarrelling all the time.” Armaan offered the olive branch tentatively.

“I guess not,” mumbled Zara. Where was this going? His hand, she noted with a thundering heart, stroked the side of her throat and trailed down the curve of a bare shoulder. She breathed deeply.

“I mean we could be friends, at least for the time we are together. I am sure you would agree that we could not live under the same roof with this kind of animosity between us.”

“Hmm ...”

She desperately wanted to step into his arms. The old, schoolgirl crush was making her feel ill-at-ease.

The heated arguments between them had been far more comfortable, effectively hiding her real feelings. But now she did not know how to react to his gentleness.

“Zara ...” he whispered softly again and every subtle nuance of her name sounded like a chant. “Let’s spend the day out today. What do you say?”

“Okay,” she managed to croak at last.

“Truce?”

“Yes.”

He bent his head to kiss her on the mouth, a seal of truce, a light feathery dream that settled on her parted lips with hope and promise. Her sigh was captured by his mouth, making her legs quiver.

Armaan wanted more, he decided firmly, and was struck by the ferocity of that need. However, Zara was already pulling back with her eyes averted. Her sudden withdrawal made him feel empty,

hungry for more.

“We ...” she began with a shredded breath, “must leave before the weather changes again.”

Armaan stepped closer, wanting to pull her into his arms. Before he could hold her, she was carrying her clothes into the bathroom to change, away from his eyes, as though the intimacy between them had never happened.

They returned to the hotel in the taxi sent for them. While they had breakfast, they talked of banal things, both wary of another quarrel.

For the first time they spent a day in each other’s company in peaceful camaraderie. It was a beginning of sorts when they walked down the beach together and waded through the surf in a quiet moment of happiness. Zara smiled as she tried to recover her balance after almost tumbling into the water. He caught her immediately, his arms going around her, searing them with fierce awareness. However, the tension dissolved, when, unable to hold steady in the onslaught of a powerful wave, they both went toppling backwards into the water.

Drenched in the cool salty waters they laughed together for the first time and it was immensely pleasurable. Armaan loved the way she laughed, the clear sparkling sound warming his heart.

They spent the day visiting some of the beautiful places in Goa. The trip to the church of St. Francis Xavier was delightful as Armaan explained its architectural significance and religious meaning to Zara who listened with rapt attention, hungry for the attention that he was showering on her for the first time. They travelled to several places in the ferry. Throughout the journey he held her fast to his side with an arm around her waist. When she tried to dislodge his arm gently, he only looked down at her enigmatically and tightened his hold. He was a good listener, she realized, and had an eye for detail. His laughter was rich when Zara narrated a particularly funny incident in her usual dry humour.

Zara was touched that Armaan offered to take her shopping for anything she wanted. When Zara took out her wallet to pay for a particularly expensive dress that he had chosen for her, he growled into her ear that it was a gift.

Later Armaan bought several more dresses for her, now that he knew what she looked like beneath those dowdy things, he said, with a naughty grin to her chagrin. Not to be left behind in the unexpected generous favours he was heaping on her, she bought him a leather whip and a cowboy hat. "The lone, bachelor cowboy rides off into the sunset!" she pointed out cheekily when he strutted in front of the shop mirror.

Zara grew silent though as the day wore on. A deep, bone-weary melancholy engulfed her. Armaan was only being kind and she, like a fool, was getting carried away. Although they had not discussed it yet, she could feel the impending talk. She shoved it aside unwilling to talk about their lovemaking, as it was still a raw wound to her. At sundown they decided to go for a walk in the surrounding greenery. They climbed the top of a cliff from where the view was fantastic with the sun setting on the deep blue and gold sea. They sat among the rocks for a while in silence. Zara plunged into a black mood of hopelessness as dusk fell.

"What are you thinking?" he asked, genuinely curious about the reason for that wistful expression. "You haven't spoken for the past one hour. I prefer you talking the way you did earlier." It was meant as a joke but it fell flat in the view of things.

"You mean you liked me with the 'waspish tongue?" she asked dully. She turned warily towards him from the edge of the cliff. Those words were still embedded in her like barbs.

"No. The waspish tongue, I am now sure, is more of a defense mechanism."

She looked back at the horizon again not wanting to get into this discussion. The words chafed against the raw wound inside her.

"Have you forgiven me yet for last night? I said some cruel, terrible things and certainly deserved that slap!"

"There is nothing to forgive. I was equally nasty, so we are even."

"Yeah, we were both angry and insensitive! And later when we made ..." She cut him short hastily.

"I ..." She fumbled for the right words. Unwilling to bring up the episode of their violent consummation, she went tearing through with

a jumble of words. “When I was a kid, people called me bastard. In the boarding school, it took me a while to understand what that meant. The only way I could protect myself was to pretend that I was just as normal as any other child with a loving family. I still believe that my parents would have loved me had they been present. When you said that even my mother would have regretted seeing me as I am today, it really hurt. I know it was an illusion that I had created for myself. I still don’t know ... if my mother took the coward’s way out by committing suicide and abandoning me. However, I would like to believe that she wanted me and that I was special to at least one person in the world.”

She had turned away from him. Something within him responded to the anguish that she had cleverly concealed until now, though now it was revealed in every line of her taut body. Why hadn’t he seen it earlier? He regretted not having had the good sense to see the truth.

Little snippets of memories surfaced like bubbles in a deep lake. Images of a little sensitive girl who wanted to play with them. Bani had whispered wicked things into his and Aparna’s gullible ears and he, like a fool, had believed the lies. He cringed at the guilt that ravaged him. He had pulled enough silly pranks to shoo her away much to the other two girls’ delight. It had been fun to see the five year old Zara scream in terror as they shut her in the attic for the afternoon while the parents were away for a party. The lazy servants would never have heard her wails of terror as afternoon turned to evening. He had not given a thought to being kind to Zara who was the youngest among them. Her parents had never been present and it had made her the easiest target to bully.

It was forbidden to talk about Malu *masi*, Zara’s mother, among the Seths. Little diffident Zara had grown more and more belligerent as years had flown by, only cementing the animosity the kids had ignited in her.

In her teenage years, she refused to come home for the summer vacation, much to her aunt’s embarrassment, preferring to stay at the convent orphanage. He had seen her a few times after that at the Seth house. He remembered her with her oiled hair tightly braided away

from her face, wearing a hideous purple tent of a dress. Her eyes flashed defiant fire at everyone present. He had by then dismissed her from his memory, rarely meeting her and was jolted out of his complacency only when he had seen her that morning in the garden a few months back.

“It is getting dark. Shall we go now?” Zara’s voice interrupted his dismal train of thoughts. They walked back to the hotel hand in hand and called room service before they freshened up.

Armaan had offered Zara the bed, much against the deep undercurrent of desire. He decided to take the sofa which Zara felt was unnecessary. However, Armaan insisted that it was the least he could do. She did not care who won. All the antagonism had been purged in one night.

While Zara was in the bath, Armaan paced about making plans. He wanted her. The thought grew into a crescendo. He was not sure how to approach her without hurting her further. He wanted to erase every stupid word and action that could have hurt Zara. This was an opportunity to set things straight between them. On an impulse he strode out of the hotel to the nearest chemist’s shop. It was always good to be prepared. He would convince her to sleep with him again. And this time he would make sure that she was happy with their decision. He avoided thinking of the emotional complications that could change his equation with Zara.

When he returned, the food had already arrived and Zara was arranging the steaming platters. Dinner was subdued, as neither had any inclination to talk. Zara had sunk into a sullen silence as the meal progressed and was startled when he stopped her from leaving the room.

Armaan caught her hand before she could turn away after a polite goodnight. “I have something to say.” It was more difficult than he imagined but he had to convince her.

He watched her eyes grow confused at the sudden change in the tone. He was still holding her hand in a warm clasp.

“Last night when we ...” he began softly.

“You needn’t mention it again. It happened when neither of us was

in our right minds. I won't say anything to Bani if that is what you are afraid of."

Armaan was taken aback. He could not care less if Bani or the whole world came to know that he had slept with his wife!

"What has Bani got to do with us?" he queried, faintly annoyed at getting side tracked. He had still not said what he had been going to say.

"She did tell me before the wedding that she and you were lovers and that I was just a spoke in the wheel that your mother had employed to stop you two from getting married."

"Bani said *what?*"

Zara watched his countenance change with dread. She did not want to quarrel with him. She was too drained. Armaan cut into her thoughts impatiently. "First of all, Bani and I were never together. She was interested but I was not. Neither in an affair nor in marriage. If Mom thought like that, she was mistaken. But I do know that Mom liked you from the beginning. I was never interested in marriage because I know what it did to my mother. She spent her whole life loving my dad. But all she got in the end were two children and the tag of a leftover wife. I hated him with a vengeance as a child!"

Armaan paused to steady his thoughts and suddenly Zara had a glimpse of the little boy who had been scarred once. Losing faith in one's own parent was damaging enough to make him commitment-phobic. She understood now why he was the way he was and regretted all those horrid things she had accused him of.

"I had never wanted to join the matrimonial bandwagon until Mom became adamant that I marry you. She was really ill and I had no choice but to agree. She seemed to like you very much and for some reason had got it into her head that you might mend my wayward ways." Armaan shrugged.

Yes, she knew that much. Her mother-in-law was the only one in the group of elders who had been kind to her.

"However, that is not what I wanted to say." Armaan continued, as he caressed her wrist with an intimacy that had her bones melting. "Last night was a disaster by all accounts. We don't want to repeat

that, right?"

She nodded, a flash of pain leapt across her eyes and she averted her gaze.

"Look at me, Zara." He tilted her face with a hand under her chin. "What I mean is that I would like to rectify the mistake I made." He paused. "It needn't be like the way it happened. I want to show you that it can be very different. It can be beautiful and sensual and memorable." The words were whispered into her ear as he stepped closer.

Her eyes flew up in sheer astonishment. "I don't understand. Are you saying that you want to ..." she could not finish the sentence.

"Yes. I want to show you that I am not such a callous, arrogant, boor as you believe me to be."

Zara pulled away shaken. She was being offered heaven on a platter. She was very sure it had its price. "Why?" She trembled visibly. "Your sympathy is misplaced. I do not need your pity if that is what this is all about. I told you we can forget what happened."

"It is not sympathy!"

"Last night you said that it shouldn't have happened."

"Yes I did. It should never have happened the way it did! We were furious with each other. We can change that together."

"Why?" She was bewildered and hurt that this was another game to torture her.

"I want you." The words fell in a hoarse gravelly tone.

Zara was knocked sideways. She was sure that it was a terrible joke. Why would he want her? The man had never spared her a glance all his life. Yes, he had been blown away last night in a frenzied moment, but to make a deliberate, firm decision on this issue was beyond her imagination. If he was being condescending, he deserved another slap. No. He looked perfectly serious. She was terrified of the storm building inside her. Did he just say that?

"Why? Why are you being so nice to me all of a sudden? You did not want to marry me anymore than I wanted to marry you," she said on a tattered whisper.

"I *don't* know why!" Armaan said in a tortured tone. "Yes, I did not

want to marry you. I have not changed my mind about marriage being a sham. But I have changed my mind about you.” He closed his eyes. His jaw tightened as he ran a hand through his thick dark hair and said, “You can’t deny that something is brewing between us. All I know is that I want you. I have never felt this explosive passion for anyone. I feel terrible about the way it started. And if you are willing we could explore this aspect of our relationship.” He reached out to clasp her hands in his. “What do you say?”

“No!” It was out before she could stop herself. She knew with certainty that there would be no turning back if she agreed. She was terrified of a hundred dreadful repercussions that would emerge out of such a deal. She would never be able to walk away from him in one piece. She was afraid that Armaan would not care if it broke her heart.

She stepped back from his arms, taking a deep shuddering breath as if she could not believe herself. “No! Not possible. Goodnight Armaan. Thanks for a nice day.”

“Zara ... please listen to me ...” Armaan began to protest immediately but she was already running into the bedroom to bang the door shut behind her.

It was like another slap in the face and Armaan reeled at the impact of her refusal. He could not understand why she appeared so frightened. He had only himself to blame after last night’s episode, he acknowledged rather painfully. Obviously, she had not forgiven him. He would have to think of a better way of convincing her. She wasn’t exactly unaffected. He had not been mistaken by her fiery response when they had made love last night. It was only a matter of time ... with a little gentle persuasion ...

Zara sat down on the bed with a thump. What she had just heard was madness! How had he come to such an erroneous conclusion about her? Did she come across as the kind of woman who would sleep with a man just for the sake of it? Well, going by the events of the previous night maybe, she was. But he was her husband! She would never have slept with him if he were not. The truth came as a shock to her. Did that mean that she considered this marriage as

important as a genuine one? Oh, what a fool to have fallen into the trap. The memory of his hands on her body had her heart galloping. His offer was a piece of heaven on a golden platter. Hadn't she wanted him since she knew what it was to be a woman?

Heaven it was, to be sure, with a heavy price tag and an expiry date! She would be buried under the weight of it, stripped to the skin of her dignity, if she let herself fall any deeper.

Or ... Maybe she should take up the offer only to rid herself of the way she felt about him. After all, they were married! After a few months' time when the excitement wore off and everything became dull and lackluster as in most marriages, she would walk out free. In the meanwhile why not take up this once in a lifetime offer. Now that Bani was out of the picture, she need not worry about being jealous either. That was one strictly avoidable emotion!

Zara jumped up and paced the floor frantically. What if there were other women? She would have to set ground rules. She walked about jerkily in circles for a while and then stood still. Another problem cropped up. What if she became pregnant? Her hand touched her belly. Last night was a huge risk. It was irreversible now. She would go and talk to him. Maybe he had changed his mind about it and the offer was only to pacify her. Well good for her, she thought, relief mingling with severe disappointment.

Zara made up her mind. She stepped into the hallway half hoping that Armaan would have slept by now. No such luck. He was standing by the window in the dimly lit living room looking out of the windows. The tall silhouette, the wide shoulders and the lean hips sent hot shivers in all the secret places of her body. She stared at him with a growing hunger.

About to turn back with her heart still hammering at her throat she heard him call out her name in surprise.

"Zara?" He was right in front of her in a second, holding her shoulders in a warm clasp.

Zara stood rooted to the floor, dressed in a cotton robe that covered her baby blue pyjamas, her hair a satin sheath behind her. Her tongue cleaved to the palate. "I ... ummm ... nothing ..."

Armaan was fascinated by the interesting shade of pink that suffused her cheeks. She began to turn away hastily but this time he caught her hand and pulled her right into his arms.

“You were saying something.” He felt his blood rush down south at the first contact with her warm body.

“I ... have been thinking,” she said carefully addressing his throat, her fists bunched at his chest. It felt so good to be in his arms but she was already losing courage until she felt his hard arousal against her belly. That gave her tattered sails a little rush of wind.

“You were thinking what?” He was drawing her inexorably into him. She smelt way too good, an ethereal, fresh, natural scent that caught at his senses and pulled down all the barriers.

She looked up at his eyes; smouldering even in the semi-darkened room. She looked down hastily; her eyes skittered down to the safety of his adam’s apple. “About last night ... It was a mistake. What if I am pregnant?” she finished, on a hasty breath.

“Well, we would just have to find a way to accommodate a baby,” he said without hesitation. “What happened was my fault and I am ready to take up responsibility. Let us hope that the situation does not arise.”

At least he was not taking the coward’s way out, she thought relieved. She breathed more easily and said, “I’ve been thinking about what you said.”

“And ...” He held his breath.

“That I agree with ... what ... you had in mind.”

“And that is ...” his voice dipped huskily.

She looked up wondering if he was going to burst out laughing for there was a mischievous glint in his eyes now.

“I am fine if you want me,” she took a shuddering breath and continued, “we just have to be more careful.”

“You are right. I will take care of that.” He was glad he had visited the chemist right on time. “Anything else?” His hands moved down to her hips, pressing her into him.

Zara was distracted but continued breathlessly, “However ... I will sleep with you only on one condition.”

“I might have guessed,” he muttered. “Go on!”

“I cannot accept a third party in this relationship. I will agree only on the condition that you won’t cheat behind my back until the time this marriage is on.”

“How can I cheat with another woman when I am an ‘arrogant boor’ whom no sane woman would fancy? And are you agreeing because you sympathize with me, knowing that no woman would have married me anyway? Why did you change your mind?” He was about to chuckle but controlled his mirth.

She drew back and wondered at his saintly countenance. Was he laughing at her?

“Yes, Zara?”

She fought hard with her own insecurities. *This* was the time to back out! She could go and live her life on her own terms without compromising her values. *And never know how it feels like to be loved?* A voice she had controlled and beaten to submission for years taunted her. She could leave now and live her mundane, unfulfilled life. Or make the most of this opportunity.

“I thought it is better to make hay while the sun shines,” she told him primly with a haughty lift of her chin, still not looking at him.

He did chuckle then, deep in his chest and swept her up in his arms, lifting her off the floor, while she buried her hot face in his solid chest.

“So you want me too?” asked Armaan, kissing the side of her neck.

“Mmmm ...”

“Say it!” he insisted.

“Yes, I want you.” It was softly whispered into his ear as she burrowed into the crook of his shoulder.

Armaan carried her into the room but did not take her to bed as she had expected. He slid down into the beanbags near the French windows. The moonlight filtering through the clear glass lit up her face imparting a silvery glow to her cheeks. Her eyes sparkled like silver with excitement. The distant roar of the waves was similar to the heated blood running through her veins. He sat near her, held her hands, and simply gazed at her for long moments.

She was his wife! Pure pleasure ran through his veins. *The thought was scary!* But his want for her was greater, submerging the warning from his brain. He had thought she would never agree to make love with him again. But she had come to him, and somehow it made him happier than anything had in a long while. He would make sure that she felt pleasure this time. He would make up for everything that had gone wrong between them.

“I am sorry that I hurt you.” Armaan said as he pulled her close into his arms and held her in a warm hug that melted her defenses completely. He sat with her on his lap close to his hammering heart for a long while in absolute silence.

Then he rose and pulled her up with him towards the wide ornate dressing table. In the silvery darkness, he held her gaze in the reflection as he ran a hand through her luxurious hair and smiled. Zara felt her heart snagged along like a kite riding high on the wind. Stepping closer from behind, he ran his hands down her hips and pulled her into him. She took a shaky breath when her satin hair was brushed away as he kissed the sensitive skin of her exposed neck. Her eyes turned glazed and she breathed deeply as his mouth traveled down the slope of her shoulder while he tugged away the lapels of the robe. He felt her tremble when he slid his warm hands into the pyjama top along the satin skin of her tummy. Slowly he pushed the robe off her shoulders and let it fall away. His hands worked on the buttons with quick efficiency. Armaan held her gaze in the mirror wanting to see every little change in those fabulous silver pools. He reached the last button and parted the material.

Pleasure coursed through Zara when his hands covered her breasts. She leaned back, unable to stand straight as he touched and caressed, murmuring something incoherent about how beautiful she was. Then he turned her around fiercely, to pull her close in a kiss that touched her soul. She moaned deeply. His kisses turned fiery while his hands removed her clothes one by one. She swayed as he stepped away to stare at her gloriously naked form. His harsh breathing told her that he was holding on to his control by a thread. She watched him awestruck as he quickly got rid of his shirt and shorts. They simply

looked at each other in the darkened room in the silvery light coming through the windows.

Zara felt his hungry gaze slide over her from head to toe, as intimate as a touch. Armaan reached up to caress her lips with his thumb and bent to kiss her again. It made her tummy hollow and she would have sunk to the floor had he not pulled her close. Folded into his arms skin to skin, the taste of heaven was too much to bear as he touched, kissed, and caressed every silken inch of her with a slow precision that had her crying out in pleasure. She gave in to his hands when they touched all the secret places, his devouring mouth following suit. She arched her back as he bent his head to suck at a breast and spread an appreciative hand over her lower belly, to sink his fingers into the hot wetness between her thighs. Zara speared her eager fingers through his tumbled hair, as he knelt in front of her to kiss her navel and down the apex of her thighs. She gasped and stopped him, noticing the harsh lines etched on his face that told her he was just as affected as her.

Whispering into the velvet darkness, Zara said that she wanted to touch him too. Zara explored to her heart's content, learning and memorizing the hard plains and contours for the first time. She gave in to the fierce urge to touch everywhere, spread her eager innocent hands on his wide shoulders, kiss the softness under the sharp line of his jaw, the tight pectorals, the smooth back, and the smattering of curly hairs on the hard thighs. His skin felt like warm velvet to her mouth as she learned what gave him pleasure. He stopped her more adventurous exploration with an oath, hoarsely saying that he might fall through if she kept up with this. Subduing her protests with a hard kiss, he picked her up and took her to bed, renewing the onslaught on her senses.

When it became too much to bear Armaan asked in a cracked voice if she were ready. In answer, she pulled him down on top of her, wrapping herself around him. She sighed as he entered her with one gentle thrust, linking his hands with hers tightly. Armaan made it slow, intense and breathtaking for her. He wanted to erase the memory of the previous time forever, making this her first. However,

he could not remain detached from the pleasure Zara was giving him, writhing under him for the ultimate fulfillment. He lost control when she cried out his name. Fulfillment was deep and satisfying and rocked them both with its intense searing heat without the thought ... *that this was anything but permanent.*

Zara hugged him fiercely as Armaan slumped over her. "Thank you!" she whispered huskily into his ear holding him tight to her chest. She wanted to savour every moment before it was lost to her. A time would come, she knew, when she would regret this decision. The price of heaven was indeed going to be heavy. But at this moment she was too full of gratitude for the small blessing she had received. It encompassed the thirst to be accepted and tonight she had inched a little closer to that feeling.

Armaan was deeply affected when she kissed him with all her heart as if he was the most precious thing to her. Somehow, the feeling was mutual. He vaguely felt the stirrings of alarm that he was treading on unknown, dangerous ground. He brushed the disturbing thought aside and rolled with her on top of him kissing her gently on her forehead. They lay satiated and truly happy for the first time in each others' arms as husband and wife.

The sounds of the birds through the latticed window woke him up. Armaan was an early riser but today was earlier than usual. The events of the night before played in his mind like the sweetest violins and he had never, ever been the least bit romantic. It was still dark outside. He looked at the woman sound asleep across his chest. His heart was pounding unnaturally, as he thought of the generous way she had felt and responded beneath him last night. Bathed in the moonlight she had been beautiful, every inch of her had been stunningly perfect ... It had been pure magic and he had never believed in it before.

Armaan did not believe it would last though. Give it another few days and the novelty would wear off. The cynical thought, nevertheless, failed to dampen his high spirits. He gazed down at her in awe and marveled at the sheer power of their coming together the night before. His hands spread through the silken hair, running his

fingers through them touching her bare shoulder, down her smooth back and curved around her hip. He dropped a feather light kiss on her brow. Zara did not stir and he smiled. They had dozed off only a few hours back.

On an impulse, he shifted her gently off his chest and laid her head on the pillow. She stretched and rolled over in her sleep without waking up. He watched her lying there without the usual self-conscious air. The blankets had slithered off and only half covered her hip leaving the rest of her body bare to his hungry gaze. The night lamp played on her generous curves with shadows enhancing her gorgeous body, her silken tresses trailing over the pillows, her face replete and yet innocent.

Quickly before she could stir in her sleep, before he could be tempted to wake her up himself to make love to her again, he pulled on his boxers, unearthed his drawing board and water colours from his suitcase. He set to work until dawn finally broke through the stained glass aperture in the slanting roof of the cottage. He rose to open the windows to let in the fresh air and sunlight. He was giving the final touches to the painting when Zara rolled over on to her stomach and raised her head sleepily to notice him busy with the painting. She rose, put on her robe and sat next to him quietly. Her sudden indrawn breath made him turn to look at her questioningly.

“You painted me?” asked Zara, her voice husky with wonder and sleep.

“Why are you surprised?” Armaan began to clean up his palette, dropping the brushes into clean water.

She looked at the painting with the open curiosity of a child. “I look so different.”

“That is because you are not self-conscious about your body in sleep.”

Armaan saw her clutch at her robe, suddenly shy. Her eyes were drawn to the painting again.

“But ... you make me look ...” she struggled for the right word.

“Both sensual and serene?” he provided, taking her hands, kissing the soft palms.

She smiled. "You make me look beautiful! There is an old world charm to this work which seems different from your other paintings."

"You recognize that?" He was surprised that she had noticed the subtle difference in this one and his other drawings. "You are beautiful and I had to paint you this way. How do you know that this is different from my other work?"

Zara felt the colour rush to her face. "A friend from the office had invites to the Souza exhibition. I found that you were exhibiting the next week among the Artists Guild. I saw a couple of your exhibitions at Dhoomimal last year. I was passing by and was curious! I wanted to return for the third part of the Symbolic Art' Series, but had an auditing tour that week." She didn't tell him that she had wanted to have a glimpse of him.

He kissed her lips, pulled her closer and the kiss grew deeper. She broke away breathlessly. "After last night ... I can't believe that you haven't noticed that I seriously need to reduce some weight."

"That is exactly why you are beautiful, Zara," he said, kissing the delicate skin on her throat while his hands slid the robe apart at her lap caressing a thigh. "You are like the renaissance paintings by the great masters of art. Your skin has the sheen and luster that a thin emaciated woman would crave. And seriously, your beauty lies in the way you carry yourself and not in how much you weigh. You are curvy enough to make me lose my head that night at the lodge. I have never fought so hard to protect myself as I did then!"

Zara laughed a clear sound of happiness and disbelief. "Enough! This is embarrassing! You can't expect me to believe all that. You had better stop before I begin to have unhealthy intentions about joining the Miss Universe contest. Got to keep my head tightly screwed on for emergencies!" She sighed and continued on a quieter note, "You didn't think like this earlier and I am not so stupid to think that I changed overnight into a celebrated beauty! So what happened to change your mind? I was the frumpy, ugly Zara until yesterday! I distinctly remember being berated for the way I looked on the engagement day."

Armaan tightened his arms around her. He would make sure that it

never happened again. She was beautiful enough for him and no one would dare say a word against his wife in his presence.

He ignored the little voice of restlessness that began to gnaw at him for the sudden burst of loyalty to Zara. He pacified himself saying that Zara deserved his support.

“On our engagement day you were dressed inappropriately. I thought you were doing it deliberately to torture me when you had a better option to wear.” He bent to kiss her again and said with a wicked grin, “Yes, I was just looking for an excuse to dislike you. But it is a fact that you have a terrible dressing sense and I will make sure that you burn your wardrobe as soon as possible.”

Zara chortled at his threat and he kissed her soundly to dispel any doubts about his intentions.

His voice lowered into a husky tone. “However, you do look gorgeous, very graceful and elegant in a sari! I thought I would fall flat on my nose when I saw you stepping down from heaven on our wedding day!” he said, finally paying her that compliment that had hovered in his thoughts every time he had seen her in that garment.

Her smile was gloriously happy. A thought dimmed her joy momentarily. “I am sorry about the engagement fiasco! I had an argument with Bani who accused me of inveigling you into the marriage. To spite me, she poured ink over my new dress. I didn’t have the time or anything appropriate in my wardrobe to wear. That dress had been gifted with a lot of affection once and it became my only hope.”

Armaan had a thunderous look on his face, “Why didn’t you tell anyone?”

“Who would have believed me? Not my aunt! Certainly not you! It was too late. I didn’t trust anyone enough to explain matters,” Zara laid her head on his chest.

Armaan held her close and swore that he would never allow her to be subjected to such humiliation. At the back of his mind, he heard his own cynical laughter at the thought. He was beginning to lose perspective. None of this was permanent so why this sudden need to protect his temporary wife? He shoved the thought aside and cradled

her into his chest. He would think about it later, he decided.

Armaan wanted to know a few other things. “Was last night completely satisfactory to change your mind about me?” He needed to know that she did not regret her decision.

Zara burrowed her face into his chest. “It was better than my fantasies.”

For a moment, Armaan thought that he had not heard correctly and he framed her face with his palms to look at her. “Your fantasies?”

Zara realized in dismay that it was no use denying it when she had already let it out. She cleared her throat, bit her lip, and fumbled, “I ... um ... you were the object of my juvenile affections.”

“You had a crush on me!” he exclaimed, astonished.

She hurried on, lest he get the wrong idea and drop her like hot coals. “I grew out of it long back so you needn’t worry about my heart breaking when we decide to terminate this arrangement.”

Armaan felt elated. But the last statement doused his enthusiasm more than he cared to admit. “You had a crush on me and you never let me know! All that display of fireworks was mere eyewash!”

It was his turn to chortle in glee and Zara raised her eyebrow in mock severity.

“Can’t keep your male ego out of it now, can you?” She wagged a warning finger at him, “You better not tattle about it to anyone. It is a wonder Bani hasn’t murdered me yet for taking away her bowl of cream, from right under her claws!”

He lifted her off her feet and settled her gently on the bed against the pillows, “The bowl of cream, as you put it, was never hers to have.” His dark head descended to kiss her thoroughly. The roaming, inquisitive hands untied her robe deftly to slip inside the lapels, dispelling any doubts about ownership both ways. It was more than enough for the time being, thought Zara, deliriously giving in to burgeoning pleasure, as his head dipped between her breasts.

A week later, they boarded the flight to Delhi. The honeymoon trip was over even before Zara could figure out what had hit her. She realized that time disappeared into nothingness when they were not quarreling. They had their little skirmishes over silly things but those

were merely ripples on the surface. They had visited several other places and spent the rest of the time in exploring the surroundings.

By night, it was a different kind of exploration. It changed everything for Zara. They talked into the night about their dreams and aspirations, skirting the issue of permanence in their relationship. She realized that Armaan was deeper than her foolish presumptions and gracefully apologized to him about the accusations of being shallow. The feeling was mutual as they learned more about each other.

“All that bickering was stupid and immature. I simply lost control. I didn’t want to admit that I was fiercely attracted to you. I was cursing myself for feeling the way I did against my will. Every time you were in the same room I wanted to kiss you. And you were so unapproachable, that I didn’t think you would ever agree to marry me without clobbering me on the head. I thought Mom was delusional to think that you would be my perfect bride,” Armaan had said on one of those velvety nights as he buried his face into her scented skin.

Zara had laughed heartily, “How else could I protect myself from you? I would feel threatened every time we met! I had no choice but to harden myself against your charms!”

“Define ‘charms’” he had purred, as he brushed his mouth on her nape.

She had pretended to yawn. “Charms-such as grouchy, mulish, pompous and ...”

“Let me see if I can change your opinion!” And he had proceeded to show her how persuasive he could be.

Later Zara had lain on his chest and said huskily that it was probably the only way they could protect themselves from each other. They were only airing the grouse they had for each other even as children. It was time to grow out of it and move on.

But there was never a word of commitment from either of them. They lived in the moment without any expectations.

By the last day, Zara knew that it was hopeless. She did not even bother to deny that she loved him. Tears blurred her eyes as Armaan signed at the reception before joining her in the taxi. This time would

never return, she thought with deep sadness and stashed away the memories in a dark hopeless corner of her heart.

6

Things went awry when Zara and Armaan stepped out of the car back home. Aparna was packing her bags for a trip to London where her husband Shiva had gone in connection with his work. He had fallen ill and had desperately called the only person he could contact. After much dithering and a sound dressing down from her mother, Aparna decided to bring him back. The kids did not have their passports ready. Since Vini would be at the boutique all day in her absence and the kids had already begun with their summer vacations, there was no one to look after them at such short notice.

“You can leave them with me,” Zara spoke up and everyone turned to her in surprise. “Armaan is here and I can take leave for a few more days. Mom would be back by evening, so where is the problem?” she shrugged.

Aparna was skeptical but she didn’t have a choice. That night she left for London, leaving her children behind with a woman who was beginning to sound like a heaven-sent blessing to her.

“Natasha, eat your breakfast if you want to play on the swing before the sun gets too hot! Nishant stop pinching her under the table; I can see you!” There were vociferous protests from both the injured party and the perpetrator of the crime. Zara, with a serene air, poured herself a cup of coffee and spread another piece of toast with marmalade just as the kids liked it. Natasha had been particularly weepy since morning and she was trying her best to cheer up the child.

Three days ago, it was a gargantuan task to deal with them. Vini had hurried off in the morning to the boutique while Armaan had an urgent unscheduled meeting with an international curator, clearing up the backlog of work; Zara was left with the kids running helter-

skelter with no idea how to tackle their needs.

Armaan had rushed back home to Zara in the afternoon and together they had restored some order. With dire warnings to the children of a reddened behind, he had set about sorting out their squabbling. The children adored him and it was easier for Zara to handle them after that. He left for a couple of hours to finalize some work in his studio. By the end of the day, she had tamed them into submitting to her will.

Armaan returned in the evening and took charge again, helping Zara with the kids and their holiday assignments. Natasha was already drooping on his shoulder by dinner time.

As Zara flopped into bed that night, after tucking the kids in with an equally exhausted Vini, Armaan had cradled her head into his chest, "I am sorry. Why did you agree that you will take care of the kids?"

Zara smiled tiredly, "That's what we do for each other as a family, right?"

Another woman would have baulked at the idea of babysitting two boisterous kids. Armaan saw things much more clearly now. Zara was not the kind of woman to back off from a challenge, always ready to extend a helping hand. He was amazed at the reassuring warmth in her that calmed those around her. He wondered why he had been blind to it earlier.

"And, I think I gained some ground today," Zara had said, trailing a finger on his bare chest. "Tomorrow will be better. I also think it was an unconscious act of rebellion against being left behind. Besides, it's great training! I hope to have children some day!"

"You want to have kids?" Armaan's voice hardened.

She had looked at him quizzically. What was that sudden burst of irritation? "Yes I do. Why?"

"You will have to marry someone else after we get a divorce."

Zara was silent. "It would have to be permanent for me to have a family. I hope there is a man out there who would consider me worthy enough to marry me for myself." Her voice had dipped sadly. She could not imagine marrying anyone just for having children. How

could she love any other man the way she loved Armaan?

This morning, Armaan watched the play of emotions on her face, a spoon in her hand, admonishing the children gently to eat up quickly. She was good with them, he thought, with a curious mixture of elation and dread. This was the third morning with Zara and the children and he was beginning to like it too much, he realized, with a feeling of foreboding.

Armaan could not forget the conversation about Zara wanting a real husband and a family of her own. Those words had punched him in the stomach. He had refrained from giving a reply, fuming in silence at that time. That reaction was uncalled for, he thought sourly. Of course she had a right to have a family. It reminded him that Zara would be gone within a few months. The feeling that began to bite into him did not feel like relief at all. It did not seem very healthy for his peace of mind. Not wanting to face up to it, he had rolled on top of her that night and kissed her thoroughly as if to stamp his seal on her forever.

“Is mummy never going to return?” Natasha cried out in between a mouthful of almonds.

Both Armaan and Zara shared a glance. “Why do you say that, baby?” Zara seated her gently on her lap while the child began to weep.

“Because Daddy won’t come back either.” Nishant said with a solemn air. “I don’t think people stay with each other forever.”

The cynical words hit Armaan like a bolt of lightning. He stared at some spot on top of the crockery shelf in the corner.

“Mummy will come back soon.” Zara hugged the little one as she swallowed a lump with difficulty.

“Let’s have a beetle-wrestling match!” Nishant was already running towards the playroom. Natasha slithered off Zara’s lap, racing after her brother, her worries forgotten.

“I guess we have the wrestling match scheduled today.” Sipping at her coffee thoughtfully Zara was still feeling low at the child’s words.

“And, I suppose, there is compulsory participation required by all.” Armaan captured her hands in his with a smile.

Armaan knew that somewhere she too had slipped into the past. Zara's mood lifted immediately as he looked at her with the softest look in his eyes.

The beetle-wrestling match was serious business. Nishant had brought in his collection that he had gathered the previous day in the garden. They put the assortment of scrambling insects in a small glass bottle in pairs and watched them tumble and fall over each other. They named the pairs with glorious names of valour. Zara shook the jar too vigorously to get the chaps going but squashed one of them in the process.

"Yeeowlish!" screeched Natasha at the sight of yellow sticky liquid that splattered the wrestling site.

"What is 'Yeeowlish'? Armaan was puzzled.

"It is equivalent for 'yuck'!" said Zara with a wise air. "The kids invented it! You better expand your vocabulary."

"Bortaaaarrrr!" A shout from Nishant ripped the air and he hopped around with the jar in his hands in which a large black specimen was strutting around proudly. "We won, Tasha!" His sister joined in the celebrations.

"I believe that is the cry of victory," said Armaan, fingering his chin.

"You are learning fast," said Zara impishly.

"I am beginning to feel like an ignoramus here. Guess I have a lot to learn before I can graduate in this language!" he smiled, as the children ran off towards the swing.

"You lost your beetle!" said Zara peering into the jar.

"No, I did not!" He pointed to the green shiny one that was limping towards the exit with a resigned air.

"It has lost two of its legs. That means you lost!" she teased.

"It is alive! Yours is a yellow ..." he thought hard, "Ah yes, 'Yeeowlish' splat on the glass!"

"Let's have another match to see who wins," Zara said, with a challenge in her eyes. For some reason Armaan had the feeling they were not talking about beetles anymore. He tapped her nose with his finger.

“Maybe some other time.” he said and walked towards the studio.

Aparna returned from London next week, looking pink and happy. After the barrage of incessant questions and storytelling and squabbling, the children settled down for the long overdue family meal. They had their usual games in the garden with Zara who was a pal and fellow conspirator. While having tea on the terrace Aparna and Armaan watched the kids play a boisterous game of tug-of-war in the lawn.

“I am going home,” said Aparna quietly to her brother.

Armaan was startled. “You made the right decision.”

Aparna had made her peace with her demons. She looked down at the game that was growing louder by the minute. “We were wrong about Zara.” She looked at her brooding brother. “We owe her an apology.”

“You do! And so does Bani!” he said emphatically, crossing his arms across his broad chest. “I already did my penance.”

His sister’s piercing gaze made him distinctly uncomfortable. “Marriage suits you, bro! Do I see a glow on your face?” she chuckled, deeply amused.

Armaan gave a flinty look. “You say that once more, you will be wearing my tea!” He lifted his cup a fraction to indicate his intention.

“Wow! How did I miss the signs?” Armaan pulled her by her arm towards the door. “We will be well rid of you soon!” said Armaan sternly.

Aparna, who was now more willing to talk with Zara, cornered her after dinner that night. To Zara’s surprise, she was apologetic about several things.

“You do love him, don’t you?”

Zara was embarrassed. Aparna continued walking in the dark garden hand in hand with her. “Bhai was deeply affected when Dad left. His teenage years were rebellious, hurling down the path of self-destruction. It was the toughest phase for Mom. He was intelligent and creative and it was a humongous task to divert his energy positively. He can be very unemotional on the outside. But I haven’t seen him laugh like the way he has been doing since you came

along.”

Zara listened with rapt attention. It made her heart ache more. She loved him. But she also knew that she was probably not the one who could change his heart. In all these days, he had never mentioned a need to extend their contract. She remained silent through the rest of the evening. The pain in her heart cut deeper as she watched Armaan with his family.

Armaan was already deep in conversation with Shiva when Aparna came down with her luggage early next morning. Zara watched the men shake hands and thump each others’ back in camaraderie. Vini was teary eyed. Aparna hugged Zara tightly with unexpected warmth. “Thank you for everything. Take care of him. He needs you. And we need to get to know each other better, right?”

Zara nodded, warming up to the genuine smile. Zara kept thinking about her parting words. Aparna was mistaken. Armaan did not need anyone. He was strong and independent of maudlin irrational emotions like love. She looked at him having a quiet chat with Shiva who considered Armaan like his elder brother. Aparna seemed to have changed overnight. Love did that to people. The kids basked in the reflected feelings. With a heavy heart, everyone bid them a much-awaited goodbye.

Everyone missed the children and the house seemed empty without them. Zara resumed her work, which she brought home like a beast of burden. Often, Armaan would find her slumped with the laptop still on and would gently tuck her in bed. Life was peaceful. His home had become a comfort zone for Zara. She had never felt this happy, she decided, as everyday she learned something new about Armaan. Beneath that unyielding surface she instinctively sensed an impatient restlessness that led to the creation of his finest works. Yet he was infinitely patient, executing his work with a mind-boggling precision. His impulsive actions sometimes astonished her on many occasions. And so did his wit and immense charm that surfaced in the most unexpected moments.

Zara experienced that side of Armaan, at a glitzy party at aunt Sudha’s house one night. Everyone was having a lovely time except

Zara who felt stifled in her old home. The piercing feeling of being an outsider dug at her every time she visited the Seth house. Armaan had been swept away by Bani and their set of old friends from her side as soon as they had entered. Vini was sitting in a circle of acquaintances with Sudha.

Zara's eyes were hooked on Armaan who was laughing and signing autographs surrounded by a cluster of art lovers. Zara drifted about aimlessly for some time chatting with a few other guests, desperately wanting to return home, when the DJ turned up the music for a dance.

She sidled into the corner where the doors of the great hall opened into the garden and suddenly Armaan was by her side.

Her somber mood lifted when she saw the gleam of mischief in his eyes. He held out a hand for the dance. Zara smiled and shook her head.

"I don't know how to dance. Will you teach me?" said Armaan with a dramatic sigh. He had watched her blend herself with the background for the past hour and couldn't bear that forlorn look on her face. Not when he understood the reason behind it.

Armaan clasped her hand tight and led Zara into the centre of the stage where many had already gathered. She protested hopelessly that she had two left feet. Blushing furiously at being the centre of attention, she tried to look composed but couldn't help gurgling with laughter when he squiggled his brows comically. Before she could say anything, Armaan slid an arm around her. His hand on her bare back slipped in between the gold zari strings of her midnight-blue blouse. Her eyes flew up to his in consternation when she felt a tiny tug at the string.

"Put your arms around me, Zara." His hooded gaze slid over her midnight-blue-silk-draped body as they swayed to the music.

"Armaan!" she whispered hoarsely.

"Quick! Or I will kiss you right here!" Grinning wolfishly, his hand tugged at the delicate string again, his fingers caressing the smooth skin of her back.

"Armaan, stop it!" Zara was mortified. Her arms went around him,

glad that her back was now to the wall. The other dancers were absorbed in each other.

“Promise me that you will never hide again.” Armaan said his mouth brushing her ear.

Zara’s eyes misted. He was apologizing in his own way, for all those times when he had been cruel to her. He was giving her the respect she deserved in front of her own family where she had often been rejected and berated as a child. She smiled gratefully and nodded.

“Say, ‘yes my lord’!” said Armaan imperiously; reminiscent of the bully he had been once.

“Ha! You wish!” chortled Zara, bouncing back to form.

“Say it ... or ...” His mouth was descending towards her.

“Later! Armaan, I promise ... please!”

And Armaan relented, only after extracting many more sweet promises. They had danced oblivious to everyone after that, unaware of Vini’s beatific smile or Bani’s vengeful sneer. The first thing Zara had done that night in the privacy of their bedroom was to fling herself into his arms and kiss him passionately for the most memorable night ever.

Armaan was affiliated to several charitable organizations to which he donated generously. No one except the family knew about it. He disappeared on certain days to give them hands-on help. Zara was delighted when he asked her to accompany him to help out. The thought that she was a part of his world and that he sought her opinions and company gave her a deep sense of belonging.

Armaan was just as busy as Zara was and she found him stuck in the studio on many nights. On the weekends she would slip in at lunchtime to watch him work.

He had an eclectic style and enjoyed versatility with a plethora of mediums. He explained some of his work and she understood how much passion and depth one required for the level of creativity he displayed. His watercolours were translucent and delicate. The oils and pastels were vivid and the charcoals were startling in its raw power of expression. Zara saw the nudes he was famous for and realized that, he could bring out the spiritual intensity, a connection

with nature, through the female forms in his work. His women were not just sensual creatures, but powerful spiritual beings connected with the creative force and the endless cycle of birth and death. They were part of the trees and the ocean and the seed and the root. The range of emotions that he could portray through colours astonished Zara.

Their relationship had grown more intense. Zara couldn't find the words to describe it. Armaan surprised her at all times with the things he did for her. On the days she was late, he would simply land up at her office to pick her up and then take her out to dinner. Pari would swoon every time he made an appearance at the workplace and Sumana grumbled that Zara had only eyes for her husband these days. But Zara dreaded the passing of each day, as it brought her closer to the end of the contract. She wanted as much time with him as possible. And she cherished those times when he showered that attention on her. While she worked in the kitchen on the days when the cook was on leave, he helped her out so she could finish her office work. He confused her at times with his sudden brusqueness, but she was getting used to it.

When Zara left town on an auditing tour for a couple of days, she understood the meaning of misery. Armaan hardly spoke at length over the phone, though he made it a point to call her several times a day to check on her. It was a surprise to see him at the airport where he held her hand tightly, again, not saying a word of welcome, while she chattered like a bird until they reached home. He never said he missed her even when he took her to bed and made love to her urgently as if it were their last day together.

Little did Zara know, there was more simmering beneath the surface.

Armaan had not felt so good in years. He did not know how to curb the jubilant feeling. It was too perfect. He had begun to get used to her flitting around the house and the studio. He should have considered it as infringement on his personal space, but he could not. That aspect bothered him at times. *Since when had Zara become a part of him that he did not grudge her that niche in his mind?* Zara would sit

quietly as a mouse; sometimes so unobtrusive was her presence that he did not know she was there in the studio until she asked him a quiet question.

There were times when he would spend the night on the studio divan. Some of those velvety dawns became more beautiful when Zara would quietly slip in under the covers with him and cuddle close, her body merging with him in passion.

Sometimes Armaan would wait for her in the early hours of dawn in the studio bedroom. The sight of her racing across the vast garden when she came to him under the starlight was a thrilling experience. They quarreled less now, though at times they did fall to sparring like old times.

Armaan would catch her looking at him with that sparkle in her eyes, which would get veiled quickly before he could grasp the meaning behind it. However much he probed thereafter she avoided answering him, instead deflecting his questions with a sarcastic rejoinder. Zara never kept a grudge in her heart and that was one redeeming quality he couldn't boast of. He brooded at times with severe mood swings, which she primly called artistic license to rudeness.

Two months flew past without either of them being aware of the passage of time. Her locked up apartment in Gurgaon was a faded memory. The niggling thought that she would return to her own little space after six months was sometimes a painful thorn in her chest. But she remained optimistic as her days were filled with sunshine and love.

Zara noticed a million changes in herself. The best was Aparna's open friendship. Often, Zara would drop in at her boutique for a chat. Aparna was a great help where Zara's dressing sense was concerned and ironed out most of the problems with sound advice without compromising on Zara's inherent sense of dignity and natural grace.

Zara quickly learned everything about how to look presentable effortlessly. Bani would often join in, but soon realized that she had no place in the scheme of things as Aparna sternly began to refuse indulging her friend's juvenile whims and fancies.

Armaan saw the change and felt an intense pleasure and secret pride in Zara's ever-changing appearance. Zara blossomed in front of him. His opinions though, were stringently given in clipped tones most of the time.

Underneath it all, Armaan was becoming painfully aware that it didn't matter what Zara looked like or what she wore anymore. He dreaded the time slipping through his fingers.

Armaan had a crowded social diary even though he was reclusive by nature. Most of it was a professional necessity. If it weren't for his sharp business acumen he would not have been so famous or wealthy. Zara's initial presumptions and her own insecurities melted away slowly as she became a part of his social world accompanying him whenever he wanted her company.

They were getting dressed for one of those occasions, a high profile get-together at a hotel where his paintings were exhibited. Zara was wearing a shimmering black georgette sari with silver and crystal embellishments that brought out the sparkling stars in her grey eyes. Her hair was swept back from a centre parting into a loose bun at her nape and she wore black pearls around her neck.

Armaan pulled her into his arms and crushed her lips with his own before burying his face in her throat. She smelt good and for a while, he held her as if he wouldn't let her go.

He loved to see her happy. It made him happy. His eyes clouded at the awareness.

"You look stunning! Dressed to kill, are you?" he murmured, with an impassive face though his eyes glowed.

"Can't help it, can I? Got to look for a groom very soon!" she answered flippantly with a dazzling smile as she wrapped her arms around his neck.

There was black silence for a few brooding seconds as Armaan's countenance turned as hard as granite. He tightened his grip around her hips to near painful levels. His voice dipped dangerously "Indeed you must. How could have I forgotten that! But you dare not think of it while you are still my wife."

Zara was contrite. "Armaan, I didn't mean ..."

He silenced her with a hard kiss. His arms were bands of steel around her and she swallowed a cry of protest as he let her go suddenly. "Let's go."

The party was in full swing when Armaan realized that Zara was nowhere to be seen. The earlier somber mood had dissipated and he had apologized while she had danced with him in the ballroom after the lavish dinner. He had looked into those starry eyes and felt guilty that he had been nearly cruel to her before they had left home.

It had hit him hard when Zara had mentioned looking for a groom for herself. He did not want to dwell on the unpleasant thought. He could not figure out why it should bother him so much. It was part of the contract they had made and he obviously had no reason to object to anything she wanted to do after that. The decision to enter into a physical relationship was mutual and after the stipulated period, both of them would be free to explore other avenues.

It did not feel very good when he thought clearly about it. On the contrary there was nothing clear about his thinking these days.

Well, for one thing, he thought with self-righteous pomposity, that being a divorcee, Zara might have her options reduced. That would be sad. Hmm ... Well, he might be able to help her by extending the stipulated period from six months to ... may be a year ... or two. He liked the idea. Well, they could still be friends as some couples were. After all, it need not be complicated. Maybe she would be agreeable to living with him even after the divorce. He began to feel better.

It was more than an hour since Armaan had seen his wife and he was getting a bit concerned. He enquired with the host who laughingly teased him about losing his better half within such a short period of their marriage. It was not easy to get away from some of the guests as they claimed his attention discussing various aspects of contemporary art. A well-known industrialist wanted the sold artworks autographed by Armaan. That took a while. He scanned the area for a glimpse of black shimmering georgette in the crowd but everyone began to mill around for more autographs. A prominent socialite wanted to know when his exhibition trip to Belgium was scheduled as she wanted to plan her vacation accordingly. Distracted

he answered some of them vaguely and made flimsy excuses to get away. After letting his manager take over, he was hurrying towards the lounge area where some of his sold out work was exhibited. Zara was not there.

The dance floor seemed crowded but he could not find her there either. Armaan was worried now, and disgusted with himself. Zara was a mature woman and certainly capable of taking care of herself. She must have slipped out for fresh air into the garden. Unable to stop himself, he pushed his way across the room to the open doorway. He was miffed that she had left his side without a word. Now that was the most stupid attitude to take up, he thought cynically. No one ever stuck around with their partners throughout the party! The reasons were numerous but he shoved them all aside by saying that after all he was supposed to keep an eye on her safety since she was his wife. He moved around the blue, lit-up pool even looking inside the darkened Billiards room.

By now, he was getting angry. How could she be so irresponsible? He found himself in a dark corner of the green turf. There between the shrubs under a canopy was Zara with another man. They were sitting on the bench deep in conversation, completely oblivious to the surroundings. He recognized the man he had been introduced to earlier, an old friend from her college days. The man was explaining something and Zara seemed to be lost in his words. Then the man took her hand and held it.

Armaan was struck by the ferocity of jealousy that bit and ate into him like acid. It was with supreme control that he stopped himself from thundering down on the two of them to drag her away from the fool! No, it seemed he was the fool here. Now that she looked stunningly attractive, there would probably be more men groveling for her attention. She seemed to be making good use of her newly minted image.

The thought of losing her ripped through him like a blast. What a fool he had been. How could he have done exactly what he had never wanted to do? The truth was there right in front of him.

He loved his wife Zara. There was no way he could escape now.

With that agonizing thought, he turned back to the party, raging mad like a wounded leopard trying to escape a trap.

When Zara returned, she saw Armaan glowering at her across the crowd. She made her way through finely set tables where people laughed and ate enjoying the evening.

“What is it?” she asked him with her hand on his arm, concerned that he looked furious. Armaan was smiling all the time at the people surrounding him, making appropriate comments, but she knew him better now. His dark brown eyes glinted with the old fury that she remembered so well.

His voice deserted him when he looked down at her inquisitive face. What was he supposed to tell her? “I think we should leave,” Armaan said curtly.

If Zara was surprised by the change in attitude, she did not argue about it. “Of course,” Zara said in a clear voice that indicated that she did not appreciate being herded like docile sheep out of the venue.

They met the host and said goodbye to the other guests quickly. In the car, Armaan stepped down on the accelerator. After a while when the silence became overpowering she probed, “Are you going to tell me or not?”

“Tell you what?” he asked with the same gritty voice.

“About why you have that scowl on your face?”

“What scowl?”

“The one that makes you look like our gardener when he finds his precious seedlings trampled by the children.”

“What rubbish! Why should I be angry?” He wasn’t angry. He was enraged! Simply, raving mad and on the verge of ordering her to keep away from all male company!

“Of course your angelic countenance tells me that you are in the sweetest temper right now.”

“Look, just leave me alone, ok.” The aggression broke free, “And what makes you so chirpy anyway?”

“What’s there to not make me so chirpy?”

“Did you enjoy the party?”

“Yes.”

He seethed inward at that. "Of course you enjoyed it, getting cozy with your boyfriend!" he drawled scathingly.

Zara was getting irritated now. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"Exactly what it does! I was looking for you everywhere for hours before I found you sitting cozily with that friend of yours completely oblivious to everything."

"Are you accusing me of infidelity?" Zara was shocked that he could suggest something so horrible about her. Then a tiny pleasurable thought uncurled inside her head. Did he care enough to feel bad about it?

"You tell me! What else am I supposed to make out of it?"

"Are you jealous?" she asked bluntly with a broad smile.

He practically burned her to cinders with an incinerating look. "Why would I be? I understand that this is a temporary arrangement and you have a right to look elsewhere after this gets over but at least have the discretion to wait until it is over. Especially when you were giving me a pious lecture on not wanting a third party involved when you agreed to sleep with me. I do not want to get embroiled in an ugly scandal. That would hurt Mom a lot."

The pain he had inflicted through those words stunned her, and then fury took hold. "I did not know that you had such a low opinion of me! All this because you just saw me talking with a man!"

"And holding hands in a secluded corner! Surely you can't make me believe that you were checking his pulse or counting the number of fingers he has?" he drawled derisively.

"Which century are you living in?" she scoffed. "You don't mind the parade of nude girls in your studio and you expect me to behave in a certain manner?"

"I only asked you to maintain a little decorum! And I do not have a parade of nude girls in my studio! Besides that is art!"

"Artists are not narrow-minded!"

"I think this discussion is pointless!"

"Right! Let us not talk at all! If you say one more word I will get out of the car and walk home!"

"I am sorely tempted to let you do exactly that!" he finished

succinctly

A host of barbed words rose to her lips but she held herself back in time. They remained silent until the time they reached home. She stormed out of the car in fury, tears blurring her vision. She hated him as much as she loved him and she didn't know how to cope with that. He had infiltrated those boundaries a long time ago. There was no turning back for her now.

The house was silent as they entered, with Vini having slept long ago. Armaan followed her into the darkened hallway, regretting every bitter word that had passed between them. In one moment of suspicion, the whole evening was ruined. Anger and jealousy reared their ugly heads to destroy the little thread of faith that had connected them. The sight of her with another man had made him furious. But his conscience smote him. Why couldn't he have just kept his mouth shut? He had no right to question her when they were parting ways after a few months. It cut him deep. He had to tell her that he did not want to end this marriage. That he ... cared deeply. She might want her freedom, he thought dismally. Even more so now, considering the way he had treated her.

Armaan prowled restlessly, "I will be back later."

Their eyes met in the mirror. She averted her tear-filled eyes quickly removing her bangles roughly, some of them clattering on the table against the mirror. She dropped an earring into her jewelry box unmindful of where it fell.

Armaan turned away, striding out of the door, shutting it behind him. Standing in the darkened hallway, he felt like an idiot. What were they quarrelling over? He needed to be kicked out of town for his idiocy ... and for falling crazily in love with Zara. He returned quietly to find Zara still in front of the mirror with her hands covering her face, crying silent tears.

"Zara ... I am sorry! I shouldn't have said such stupid things."

Her voice was wobbly, "Shekhar's wife died leaving a two-year old daughter behind. All he needed was someone to talk with ... You really think I am not trustworthy?"

"No! I was wrong!" Armaan shut the door with a soft click and

stood with his arms open. She ran to him and he folded her in a fierce embrace that crushed her to the bones. "And I don't have a parade of nude girls in my studio as you believe! I know a couple of models who agree to pose for me for a few preliminary sketches. I do not mix business with pleasure!" he added vehemently.

Zara put her arms around his neck and kissed him soundly, distracting him effectively.

"I don't know what got into me ..." Armaan said, voice cracking, trying to come to terms with the way he felt about her, feeling angry and exposed and vulnerable at the same time.

"I was ... I am ...," he struggled as raw pain gripped him. Swallowing a hard lump, he dithered, hovering at the edge of a confession.

But he held back the words, his natural reticence gaining strength. He held her tighter as Zara gazed at him, her eyes glistening with tears. He kissed her forehead and then her lips with a feather touch and simply looked down at her with tortured eyes.

"What is it? Why do you look at me like that? What has changed?" she whispered urgently, her hands cradling his dear face.

"Nothing!" said Armaan hastily afraid to utter a word that would bind him down forever. "Let's forget it happened!"

Sensitive to his internal chaos Zara insisted again. "Armaan! What is bothering you? Is it that difficult to let go?" With all the love in her heart, she bared her soul through her eyes and Armaan stood still for breathless moments.

Why had she said that? Had she guessed the truth? It was the closest he had come to admitting it. Then he kissed her hard, crushing her mouth beneath his, taking refuge in the one and only emotion he could display without being trapped in the maelstrom.

Soon they were both desperately trying to get out of their clothes and kiss and touch each other at the same time. Zara gasped as he got rid of the sari and the rest of the clothes within record time before pulling her to him. With one deft hand he pulled off the pin from her silken hair letting it cascade down her back. Her skin felt like hot silk against his hard body as he lifted her high against him to latch on to

her mouth. His hands fitted against her rounded bottom as he held her and crushed her lips kissing her all the way down to the curves of her breasts. It was impossible to stop as she felt herself throb unbearably against the hair-roughened texture of his thigh when she wrapped one leg around him. She craved for the fulfillment only Armaan could provide. They clung to each other kissing and touching as if they couldn't control what they felt.

Before they could reach the bed, Armaan tumbled her on to the soft plush carpet at their feet and sank blissfully on top of her. She had that glazed look in her eyes as she smiled trustingly at him. Pressing hard drugging kisses into her mouth he parted her legs quickly, cradling her hips into him and heard her sigh in satisfaction. It was sheer pleasure that rocked them both as they merged, his hard body invading her velvet sweet depth. She wrapped her arms around him lovingly and gave herself to him. The coming together was feral in its wake and then the melting aftermath was even more beautiful. Welded together they lay on the carpet unable to move their tangled limbs.

Armaan kissed her again and again as she stirred and stretched sleepily. He picked her up gently taking her to bed where she slept cuddled into his chest, unaware of his troubled eyes gazing at her with deep love, a reflection of what he had seen in hers before she had come undone in his arms. A smile lifted the corners of his mouth at the sight of one earring still on her ear and the double pearl strings that still adorned her throat. She had forgotten to take off two of her bangles in the tearing frenzy. They clinked and shimmered as she moved her arms in her sleep. Her hair trailed and slid through his fingers and he buried his face into the scented darkness.

They had made love without a thought for the future. He regretted not having been careful this time. After their first time together at the lodge during their honeymoon, he had always been careful about using protection. But tonight the ferocity of their coming together had not given him the time to think about protection or practicality. To merge with Zara without any barriers was almost divine.

Zara turned in her sleep putting her arms around him. He envied

that peace. Did she have no qualms about parting ways? Did she not want any permanence to their relationship? What was the meaning of that look in her eyes, as if he, her husband, was everything to her! Oh how he craved to hear her say those words! Say *what* words?

Slowly Armaan began to plot to make her stay and stopped short at the train of thoughts. He was doomed forever!

7

Zara could feel a subtle change coming over Armaan in the next few days. At times, she saw him brooding about something that seemed to put a deep sadness in his eyes. When she probed, he would avoid her with a cynical smile. He became gentler in many ways that made Zara want to blurt out that she loved him. Often she found him staring out into the garden through the window of his studio, without the brush in his hand. Thinking that he needed a muse to inspire him, she would slip away unnoticed. He began to spend more time in her company, taking her out for long drives in the weekends. While she worked on her laptop, he would simply sit up with her and read a book or tumble down with his head on her lap and go to sleep.

Zara cooked for him on the days he was late in returning and they would have a great time just having a prickly conversation. It made her happy that she could make him laugh. Their lovemaking turned both passionate and mellow as the days progressed. Some days she would end up in tears at the sheer tenderness he showed her while he touched and caressed her. Each day brought new reasons for her to love him more deeply and each day she regretted time running out for her, like slippery sand through her fingers.

The thought of a future without Armaan was terrible. And there was no way she could approach him with a confession of love when Armaan had never mentioned a change of heart. It hurt her deeply that he never thought about wanting to extend their contract. But sometimes she sensed a vague sense of desperation in him when he made love to her. With every frenzied touch, every deep kiss, he seemed to be telling her something intangible. However there were never any words of confirmation from him about his feelings.

Another month passed and Zara fell sick with an upset stomach that

had her sink into bed for a couple of days. It took her a while to come to the stunning conclusion that she could be pregnant. The pregnancy kit showed a positive, turning her world upside down. She couldn't cope with it and moped about the whole day hovering on the brink of a breakdown.

Armaan was concerned to see her pale and tired and decided to spend the day with her while she protested wanting to be alone for the first time. He wanted to take her out but she pretended disinterest. He was taken aback to see her angry over mundane issues that normally did not bother her. On Vini's insistence Zara agreed meekly to Armaan's idea about going out for dinner.

The outing did her good but she returned home and threw up everything and collapsed into bed weakly. That night Armaan held her in his arms and soothed her to sleep.

The next day at breakfast there was a sealed envelope for Zara. It was a surprise because in the day of e-mails a letter was indeed a novelty. The information it contained shocked her into silence. It narrated the story her aunt had refrained from divulging to her on many occasions. Zara was addressed as a 'bastard' at the beginning. It described in detail her nineteen-year-old mother's indiscretion and impropriety in maligning the prestigious family name by getting pregnant by a lover much older to her and then running away to Kolkata. Unable to cope with the rigors and demands of single motherhood, she had struggled for two years alone in a shanty and committed suicide by consuming poison. A two-year old Zara was left behind with the neighbours with the suicide note and the address of her aunt Sudha Seth in the wailing child's pocket.

As Zara read it for the umpteenth time, she knew who had written it. She called her aunt to probe about the letter. After hedging and arguing for a while, she reluctantly confirmed everything. She refused to believe that Bani would stoop to that level. Unable to take too many jolts, Zara spent another dark day in the haven of her bedroom.

Armaan returned in the evening to find her sitting on the terrace swing, past dinnertime with her eyes swollen and red. Zara wanted to throw herself into his arms and pour out her problems, but that

would only pave way for dependence. She wanted to tackle this on her own. However, Armaan's persistent questioning broke her resistance this time.

Armaan read the letter with a black rage etched on his countenance. The letter was clearly intended to make her feel inferior. The insults heaped on her were nothing short of disgusting and Armaan bit down on a snarl of pure rage as he read it again. His brow furrowed deeper as he suddenly realized who had written it.

"Bani," she confirmed tiredly.

"This time I will kill her for doing this to you!" He picked up his phone to call her cousin.

"Don't!" She stopped him, "I am more interested in the information the letter contains."

"It is just a name! What if it is a lie? She is obviously trying to stir up trouble for you!" Armaan stood with his arms folded across his chest.

"I did some digging up and found out about Naresh Talwar. He owns a couple of factories in Noida and has several other business ventures. If ... he is indeed my father then I think I should meet him. I called up his office and fixed up an appointment pretending to be an applicant for a vacancy for a CA."

"You really want to do this?" Armaan sat down on his haunches and took her hands in his. He missed the usual sparkle in her eyes.

She nodded wearily. She had wanted to do this for years. To face her father and ask him why he had abandoned her mother and her.

"I am coming with you."

"No I want to ..."

"I am coming with you tomorrow and that is final!" He led her into the bedroom gently. Are you sure you are not hungry?"

She shook her head while he tucked her into the bed and watched her eyes droop.

She was already asleep when he turned off the lights.

The next morning they drove to the address that Zara had discovered. The receptionist showed her the way in. Her stomach gurgled nervously. Afraid she would throw up at the wrong time, she

popped a couple of lozenges into her mouth.

“Armaan. Please ... I want to do this alone!” pleaded Zara, making him scowl disapprovingly. He agreed though without much grace and prowled about the lounge restlessly as she passed through the revolving doors into a corridor.

The short rotund man standing in front of a grand office table in the state of the art boardroom had a formidable air. Zara, who never felt nervous in an official set up, was for the first time intimidated by the fact that she was going to face her father. She stood inside the door as the man stared at her and in that split second Zara knew that she was his daughter.

Cold grey eyes, identical to the young woman in front of him assessed her from head to toe, There was a fleeting expression of surprise. He seemed to dismiss the vague sense of déjà vu with a shake of his head and turned away to settle into his seat with a dismissive air.

“You have ten minutes to describe exactly what you need from this job and that will decide whether you are eligible or not.” He flipped through the folder she had brought along to gain entry into his domain.

“I am not here for a job.” Zara knew she was playing with fire. She had found several dark corners in his business profile, something that she had not revealed to Armaan. But she had been determined to know the truth.

“What do you mean?” He was about to shut away the folder when an old photo fell out of it neatly into his lap. He stared at it with cold grey eyes.

“That is my mother Malini Sharma. By the look on your face you seem to be well acquainted with her.” Zara was surprised to find her voice calm even though she was trembling within.

The pause was long enough to confirm all her doubts. Naresh Talwar picked up the photo, flung it over the table, and snarled under his breath, “Get out!”

Unmoved by his anger, Zara looked at him coldly.

“Name a price,” he said with sinister quietness. Quickly he drew

out his bank cheque book and threw it at her face.

“I am your daughter whether you like it or not. All I want to know is why you abandoned my mother.”

“She was a clinging parasite just like you!” His sneer was repulsive. The veneer of sophistication cracked.

“She was just nineteen! Did you know that she was pregnant?”

“Yes, she told me, the sniveling stupid woman! It was fun while it lasted but she wanted more. Marriage and children! She didn’t want an abortion. She threatened me that she would tell my wife! She ran away when I took her to a doctor I knew. I never saw her after that. You wouldn’t have been here if she had been sensible! The last I heard was that she had killed herself after a couple of years.”

“You were married and you dumped her like unwanted baggage!” Zara’s voice had caved into a hoarse whisper as tears ran down her face.

Zara picked up her folder and the photograph, saying quietly, “I have wanted to meet you for years. I had hoped that you would turn out to be different from what I have seen today. I was wrong. Your money is useless to me. I won’t be coming back. My ten minutes are over and so is your one chance at redemption. Thank you for your precious time, Mr. Talwar.”

Zara turned around on rubbery legs and walked out. Armaan was at the door. One look at her face and he was ready to storm in. But she stalled him. “Armaan!” Zara was white. “Please! I don’t want a scene,” she pleaded before rushing out of the building

She stopped only when she had reached the pavement outside the gates, bending double to throw up her breakfast. She would have collapsed had Armaan not caught her in time. They hardly spoke on the way back. After they reached home, Zara headed straight to the room, bathed, and collapsed on the bed in silence. She was grateful that Vini was not present at home to witness the state she was in. Armaan wanted to take her to a doctor but she had already slept.

Late into the night, he found her sitting by the bedroom window deep in thought as she brushed her long hair. “Are you better now, Zara?” He kissed her cheek as she rested her head on his shoulder in

defeat with tears streaming down her face.

His face tightened into an angry mask. "Do you want me to file a paternity suit for you? I personally think this is not worth pursuing. You should have let me teach him a lesson, for insulting you like that!"

"He is my father! I don't need a paternity suit to prove it! You can't beat him to submission to accept me with his heart! No one can be forced to love or accept another person!" her voice dipped as she looked away. "I don't want to hurt him!"

"Don't you think your loyalty is misplaced?" He stood up abruptly. "If I were you I wouldn't have even bothered to look him up! Mine was no different!"

"No! Your father was different, Armaan! He did not abandon you. He had differences with his wife. But he always took care of your needs and kept you in his life. You abandoned him!"

Armaan reeled under that accusation. He refused to acknowledge the truth behind her words. "Oh yeah! Now this is my fault? You didn't want me to sort him out? Then why didn't you go back to him Zara?" He hit back because she had dug into a raw wound.

Zara was about to explode. She clutched her fists into her chest and gave out a cry of helpless anguish. Wanting to be alone, she ran into the terrace and shut herself out.

Armaan wanted to follow her, but knew that it was again one of those private moments she had sunken into. It was after midnight that she slipped into bed. Armaan pulled her into his arms. Zara sank into his embrace gratefully. Her voice crumbled, "All I wanted was ... to be accepted. That I belong to someone."

"Zara! I am sorry!" He held her tight as she fell apart in heart-breaking sobs.

Armaan wanted to tell her that she belonged to him and soothe her pain. But that would mean commitment! It would be foolhardy to reveal his emotions at this point when they were both vulnerable. So he held her tighter, somehow trying to convey to her that she mattered to him more than life itself.

Zara wept bitterly for a long time. Armaan cuddled her closer.

“What do you want to do now?”

Zara sighed brokenly “Nothing. Now I feel purged. It is time to let go of old baggage. You are right. He is not worth the pain. He was just a man who sired me. I forgive my mother too. She was so young. That must have been the most difficult time for her. She didn’t abort me! She let me live. She was just a sad, lonely young woman. Her suicide was a result of desperation. It is time I re-invented my identity and stopped thinking of myself as a bastard! I am much more than that!” She paused immeasurably moved, that Armaan was there to support her. Looking at him she whispered, “Thank you for everything.”

Her eyes were pools of pure love and Armaan was agonized, craving to respond to that love that he knew was his for the taking. But he shied away terrified. He knew that it would be the end of everything. It tore at him, her look of unadulterated affection when she kissed him on his mouth, showering tiny kisses all over his face and bare shoulder.

It was all he could do not to blurt out the truth when Zara gazed at him longingly with a question in her eyes. He held her tighter, burying his face into her throat and Zara slept peacefully while he cradled her head into him.

Armaan could hardly get a wink. There was no peace for him. It had deserted him long ago.

Another day passed and Zara came to the decision that she needed to tell him everything. Deep in her heart, there was a tiny speck of hope that Armaan cared for her more than he was willing to admit.

Zara made an appointment with a doctor and went for a checkup alone when Armaan was at the studio. It confirmed her condition. There was a glorious sense of elation at the thought and she just knew that whether he wanted it or not she wanted this baby. She returned home, at peace, in a better frame of mind, having resolved several issues and went in for a long bath.

Zara never expected the shock of another revelation, when she met Vini for a cup of tea in the kitchen afterwards. “Did Armaan say when he is meeting the lawyer about his father’s will? Your marriage was

within the stipulated time so they will have to hand over Armaan's money." The explanation that followed was rather depressing. So it wasn't just the love for his mother that forced him to propose to her. No other woman would have agreed to marry him at such short notice! It would be easy to discard, dowdy old Zara after she had served the purpose! What a fool she had been!

A long time elapsed and she didn't know how she managed not to cry. She would go and ask Armaan. It could not be the truth! He would have told her. What was there to hide anyway? She rose on trembling legs and went to the studio. She clung on to the feeble hope in her heart that he cared at least now. She had seen it in his eyes and she knew why he was not willing to commit.

The studio was quiet as she entered. She found Armaan working at a large canvas. The colours on the seascape were vibrant and permeated the studio with its thrumming energy. She slid into a stool a little further away without disturbing him. He seemed to be working with frenzy and as usual, she could feel the energy field around him sizzle as he poured a can of azure blue and aquamarine into the ceramic basin on the table. Dipping his hands into the rich colour, he spread it over the canvas making patterns with his fingers. He was pouring his blazing, creative aura onto the canvas. Hesitant to disturb his train of thought she refrained from saying anything for a while. It did not seem to be the right time to broach a sensitive subject.

She contemplated leaving to come back later, when he asked quietly, "What is it, Zara?"

She was startled that he had noticed her even though she had remained quiet at the far end of the studio. Armaan finished the part he was working on and washed the paint off his hands in another basin. Wiping his fingers on a towel, he came to sit beside her with an arm around her and asked tenderly, "Still thinking about your father?"

She hesitated not knowing what to say. "Your mother mentioned that you married me because of your father's will. Is it true?"

Armaan was irritated. Finding Zara's questioning look even more

irksome, he said “Yes, the will was one of the reasons my mother cited but not the vital one. It wasn’t even in my thoughts when I proposed. Mom was the reason I married you and you knew that before the wedding.”

“Why didn’t you tell me? You would not have married me if it was not for the pot of gold! Did you claim your inheritance?”

“Not yet! But Mom has been insisting! This is ridiculous! I never needed my father’s money to prove my worth! And it’s not as if I had professed undying love to you, that you should feel so bad about it!”

Her heart felt like lead when she heard that. Of course, there was no love here. She gave a harsh laugh that sounded more like a cry of pain, “You are right! How silly of me! I just gave you more credit than you deserved. I did respect your good intentions towards your mother.”

“Zara ...”

“There is something else too ...” Maybe she should just go away without telling him about the baby. That would be unfair to him, she thought.

“I am pregnant.” In the stunned silence, she could only breathe unwilling to let go of her calm. Armaan only stared at her his eyes growing incredulous when she said the words. What had she expected? That he would proclaim his joy from the rooftops? She hesitated and then continued, “That night after the party ... We got carried away.”

Armaan stood up abruptly, pacing the floor. Zara was pregnant with his child! It shook the edifice of his existence. How quickly life had turned upside down. A baby would mean a permanent bond between him and Zara. There will be no divorce! It was exhilarating! No, it was suffocating! On the one hand, he felt instinctively happy. On the other hand, it felt like someone had ripped apart his armour and left him open to pain. He ran a hand through his unruly hair. “Everything is happening too fast! What do we do now?”

The question was addressed more to himself than to her, but he heard her firm answer. “I am keeping the baby whether you like it or not.”

How could she even presume that he would ask to terminate the pregnancy? “Obviously, we are going to keep the baby,” he said icily, anger getting the better of him. There were too many emotions clamouring for attention here. “Now that this complication has arisen there is no way that we can get a divorce.” It was the perfect reason to tell her that he did not want her to leave. However, he was unprepared for the way she reacted.

Zara stood up proudly and said in a stilted voice, “You need not alter your plans just because I am having a baby!” How dare he call her baby a ‘complication’! It hurt dreadfully! She should have known. Why had she expected him to be happy! She had wanted him to declare undying love for her! How could she have been so idiotic to believe that he would love her and accept the baby because of that love? In his world, love did not exist. She searched his angry face for any traces of that elusive emotion with dwindling hope.

“Are you telling me that you want a divorce from me?” Armaan was battling with anger. With that, he became aware of another thought. Had he not seen pure love in her eyes so many times? Why was he not able to tell her that he loved her the same way? The thought terrified him! Had he been mistaken?

“Let’s stick to the schedule, shall we?” she said, in a brisk business-like fashion. With a steely look that he hadn’t seen for a long time, her body taut with tension she continued, “I have a busy week ahead and I may have to go out of town for some time. I was thinking that we should think things over while I stay at my old flat for the next few weeks. I’ll go up and pack right now!” The bright brittle smile she gave him was pure hard work and it managed to cut him to pieces when he saw a shimmer of wetness in those grey eyes.

“Damn you Zara! Don’t say that you are going to live alone in this condition? I will not allow that!” he thundered. In his chaotic state of mind, another grim thought staggered him. Zara saw it in his face, the dreadful suspicion that she might follow her mother’s footsteps.

Zara stared at him, hope draining away. She had wished only for a few words of love. She stood straighter, her spine aching with the effort. “You don’t have to worry about how I will manage. Besides, I

am tougher than my mother was. I won't be doing anything foolish that would hurt me and the baby. I have always wanted children and I am keeping this one. I will survive and make a new beginning with or without you." She said the last words in a huskier tone that trembled with hurt. "Goodbye, Armaan!"

It struck him such a blow that Armaan reeled from the impact. She was leaving. And he was standing there like a fool allowing her to go. Armaan could not move an inch when he felt his heart crack. The studio door closed behind her. He slumped on the stool, a big man, defeated by his own inner enemy.

After all these days of meticulous planning and self-deception, he had lost her. It was like jumping headlong into dark icy cold water and floundering about in sheer terror. And the worst thing was that he had been too cowardly to accept that he had fallen in love with her irrevocably. He could have easily stopped her with one word and all he had done was drive her further away. He had done exactly what his father had done. In betraying her trust, inadvertently, he had become what he feared most. *He had become his own father.*

A month passed without a word from Zara. Armaan called her several times but she refused to pick his calls and he almost spent a day at her doorstep hoping to meet her. He called her friend Sumana but she only gave him vague answers. A neighbour informed him that Zara was out of town for a week.

Armaan found out later that his mother had Zara's new number which she firmly refused to give him. Vini had been so upset about Zara leaving home that she had accused Armaan of being a stubborn mule who didn't deserve a loving wife. She added that it would be better if Armaan carried a sack of stones on his back for the rest of his life as all mules do. Fortunately Zara had not informed Vini about her pregnancy. For many days Vini avoided her son, refusing to acknowledge his presence. Armaan had gone crazy by then, worried that something would happen to Zara while he and his mother slugged it out. After a long battle of wits he finally wrestled it out of her with promises of bringing Zara back home.

The next week, Zara opened the door to find Armaan waiting impatiently with his hands on his hips. Without a word, he strode in and stared at her long enough to burn a hole through her. She looked drained, her face pale, wearing one of those old shirts that he had ordered her to discard months ago. Her hair was loosely braided as usual. Her jeans clung to her shapely legs and memories crashed through his thin defenses.

To his famished eyes she was beautiful. He didn't care what she wore or what she looked like. He ached to gather her close before he lost his mind. Unerringly his eyes were drawn to her stomach. Wanting to reach out and touch her to feel his baby growing within her. He stepped forward and then stopped.

“Why haven’t you been answering my calls?” His voice was harsh.

There was no polite greeting. Zara was too tired to squabble with him. “My phone was lost and I had to change my number, I did call mom several times.” She had not wanted to hear his voice. That would most likely have set her back in her path to redemption. She had tried hard to forget. However, the life growing within her had made that impossible. Every night she cried herself to sleep in her lonely bed. She had not wanted to answer his calls because she was afraid that he might want to discuss the divorce proceedings. She simply drank in the sight of him. He looked leaner and his eyes gleamed with a feverish light.

“How are you? Mom told me that your exhibition was a success.” She gripped the back of the chair for support.

Armaan nodded, but did not want to discuss his work. It was not easy to start where they had left off without some explanation and he did not know how to begin.

“Zara ...” He began pacing the floor but she interrupted him.

“I know that you want your freedom. I am ready to sign the papers any time.” Her eyes were deep grey with anguish.

Armaan took a step toward her but Zara backed away afraid that she might cry out in pain making a fool of herself. She wanted the parting to be dignified and not a dirty scramble devoid of self-respect.

There was no way Armaan could stop himself from exploding, “I didn’t come here for the divorce! I missed you! I just wanted to see you. When you didn’t answer the phone I thought I might have been mistaken about the love you felt for me, the love that I thought I saw in your eyes everyday you were with me. Tell me that I was wrong and I will go away. But you can be sure that there will be no divorce! I won’t let you go!”

“Why?” Zara was still as a stone, hanging on every word he said, hope growing afresh.

“Because since you left, nothing has been the same! I can’t get over this gnawing emptiness! You are a part of me!” He stopped and then with a haggard look, he said hoarsely, “I love you Zara! Will you come back home? Don’t make me beg!”

She was already hurtling towards him with a cry, her arms thrown around him, when he caught her tight and lifted her off the floor, crushing her to death. With a groan of pure pleasure, he kissed her hungrily, while tears slipped down her face. Zara wanted to hear more but he did not allow her to think anything for a while, running his hands feverishly all over her to make up for the lost time. He laughed when she kissed him deliriously, wrapping her arms about his waist to bury her damp face into him.

“What took you so long?” she asked, wiping her tears with the back of her hands.

“I knew that I loved you that night after the party when I saw you with Shekhar, the night the baby was conceived. I could have gone up in flames with jealousy. It was sheer cowardice that I didn’t want to admit even to myself. I thought I could get away by pretending that it was only desire. I was concocting elaborate plans to convince you into staying back without having to make a commitment about how I really felt. It was such a farce! I was such a moron!” He kissed her again, his eyes faintly moist.

Zara reached up to kiss his chin, loving the feel of his prickly stubble and the rich masculine scent of his skin dabbed in faint cologne. “The day I left, I thought you might confess about how you felt. No husband would do all those things you did, without feeling something at a deeper level. After the initial fireworks, I felt so drawn to you that it was increasingly becoming difficult to hide the way I felt about you. I wanted to give you all, Armaan. But every time I wanted to reach out, you seemed to slip away and shut me out.”

Armaan heaved a deep sigh and framed her face in his palms. “I was such a mess, Zara! I thought I knew how to deal with the complexities of a relationship. When Dad left, it left me devastated. Aparna had her own problems but she managed to air it once in a while to get a better perspective, while I bottled it all up. I lost faith in love. I had sworn that I would never give anyone enough power over me to make my life as miserable as Mom’s. Dad became the symbol of betrayal for me. I refused to look at it from his point of view. You were right, I refused to acknowledge that he did love his

children, whatever the relationship between him and Mom.” He stopped to ponder over the past. “I was using him as a shield, an excuse to protect myself from getting hurt.”

He stopped again to brush her hair away from her face and kissed her tenderly. “Most of all, I was afraid that I might become like my father! I was terrified that I might not be able to sustain a stable relationship with a woman.” His face contorted with pain and she hugged him fiercely giving him time to calm down.

“Then you came along and broke down every barrier I had carefully erected. I fell hard even before I knew it. You were so beautiful in every way. Strong, capable and immensely courageous. The initial antagonism and misunderstanding disappeared when I saw the real you. And I became more afraid, as each day brought fresh joy to me, just to be with you. I saw the love in your eyes every day, and craved, and dreaded to hear you declare it. I wanted to love you, protect you, take care of you, and then I wanted to run away because my fears were hounding me.”

“The baby was supposed to be good news!” Zara complained.

“It most certainly was! I was thrilled that now I had a reason to hold on to you. But I panicked that I would get more entangled in this relationship and you might have enough power over me to crush me. I realized that I had become my father after all. I had finally betrayed the trust of the one woman who could love me. Like a fool I stood there allowing you to walk out.”

“You are not your father, Armaan!” said Zara softly. “You are strong! You have the strength to turn situations around when there’s no hope. You changed me. I thought I was unworthy of anyone’s love. You made me the woman I am today! The man I lived with for the past few months was more trustworthy than everyone I know. I trust you completely!”

He held her for long moments, burying his face in her throat raising his head every now and then to kiss her deeply.

“I love you so much!” Zara said, kissing him back fervently.

He caressed her rounded belly and sighed, “Promise me that even if I behave like an idiot at times, you wouldn’t leave me. Let’s make it a

rock solid relationship that doesn't get shaken by mere quakes of insecurities, boredom, daily wear and tear and jolts of domesticity. I would rather we fought every day, than live without each other or without deep, abiding faith! Will you trust me, Zara?"

"I do!"

"I love you! Let's go home!" He kissed her soundly again and grinned. "No I think we should stay here! Mom's nearly killed me with her moral lecture! She's driven me nuts accusing me of all kinds of sins! Hell! Even Aparna has been acting cold, telling me that I don't deserve someone like you. She believes firmly that I would die a grumpy, lonely old man."

"You are a grumpy man! But lonely? Not if I have a say in the matter!" said Zara impishly.

Armaan grinned widely as she bubbled with laughter, before swinging her up in his arms on his way to the bedroom. Zara wrapped her arms around him in delirious joy. The feeling of homecoming was incomparable.

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A PERFECT MISMATCH

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